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THE·MAN·WHO·WAS·DEAD

ARTHUR·W·MARCHMONT

THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD

"IT WAS AS THOUGH I WERE GAZING ON MYSELF, DEAD!"

(*Page 51.*)

THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD

BY

ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS BY

F. H. TOWNSEND

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THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

I DARE NOT.

DID she love me?

I was determined that that day should see the question answered. I would know the best or the worst; and the sun should not go down before my suspense had ceased to rack me.

It was going down fast—sinking, blood-red, into a sea of copper-coloured glory, the crimson radiance of which illumined Normia's earnest features, kissed the sheen of her hair, flooded her large dark eyes with an even richer lustre than usual, and made a glowing setting for the dainty grace of her lithe figure and faultless beauty of face.

Except as it thus formed a sort of halo about her, I did not take much notice of the sunset, however. My eyes were all for her, and my thoughts bent on finding the chance and the courage to speak.

Self-conscious and ill at ease, I had been trying to hide my nervousness under a lot of

commonplace drivel and surface talk about the weather, society gossip in Belgrade, the latest military rumours, my home and people in England, and the rest of it; skipping from topic to topic with the irresponsibility of the merest tittle-tattler, and then broke off suddenly from a description of my father's place to say that I was going shooting on the following day in the Valjavo woods—a few miles out of Belgrade.

Her forehead puckered, and, with a smile confined to her eyes, Normia turned toward me.

"In how much of all you have been saying do you feel any real interest, Mr. Pershore?" she asked in her direct way.

I laughed jerkily. "Not much, I'm afraid."

"I was sure of that. And why say it? It is not like you."

"Perhaps I'm afraid to say all I do feel," I answered so earnestly that for an instant her eyes flashed inquiringly into mine.

But she turned away. "Let us enjoy this magnificent sunset," she said. Then she stretched out a hand toward the west. "Those are the Valjavo woods. See how the sun reddens them. If you were a Serb, Mr. Pershore, you would not go there to-morrow; you would read that blood-red light as an omen of disaster."

"It is shining on us as well as on them," I answered. "I do not associate you with disaster."

She paused and sighed before replying.

"I hope disaster is behind me and mine,"

she said thoughtfully. "But who knows? You know the proverb: 'Whom the copper sun kisses shall drink the cup of sorrow.'"

"There are some thousands of us being kissed at this moment, then," I said, flippantly.

"A very English reply, Mr. Pershore; but this is Servia, and maybe——" She hesitated, shivered slightly, and left the sentence unfinished.

"I view the sunset very differently."

"Tell me," she cried eagerly, and smiled. "I do not wish to think. When I think I am melancholy—I fear things. I would rather laugh."

"I have made a resolve to find out something before the sun goes down," I answered, with a touch of doggedness. I was finding it very hard.

"You will do it, I know. You English always do what you resolve. I have such faith in the English. Tell me." This with a little air of insistence.

"It is about you," I began, and then came to a sudden halt, as she faced and disconcerted me with the broadside of her eyes.

"About me? Why, of course I will tell you, if I can." She said this with an air of such complete unconsciousness of my meaning that for the moment I could not bring myself to say a word. "You are laughing at me, Mr. Pershore," she declared.

"God forbid!" I cried. My tone was so earnest that once more she flashed her eyes on me, wide with astonishment and speculation, and tinged with nervous concern.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then she said: "Shall we go into the house? I am expecting the Baroness to arrive every moment. You know that I am here entirely in her charge, Mr. Pershore."

I read a note of warning, and then took my courage in both hands.

"What I have to say is for you alone to hear," I answered, my voice low and unsteady. "I want to test that proverb—to know if it be sorrow or joy the copper sun brings me. I love you, Normia."

She stood quite still by my side, her eyes on the ground now; and her breath quickened. I captured her hand, and she let me hold it.

Then she heaved a deep sigh, and, withdrawing her hand gently, lifted her face and looked straight at me without speaking. My heart beat rapidly.

In the silence the *frou-frou* of silken skirts came to our ears.

"The Baroness," whispered Normia, and into her eyes there came the unmistakable shrinking of fear.

"For God's sake, answer me, Normia!"

But before she could reply the Baroness's voice broke in, sweet, soft, and melodious, but to me like the jangle of untuned bells.

"My dear Guy, how delightful to find you here awaiting me! This is indeed worth coming home for;" and with a radiant smile she held out both hands which I was compelled to take.

"I am very glad to see you, Baroness," I returned, with a show of courtesy. But I

wished she had been at the other end of the earth.

She kissed Normia then on both cheeks with a great display of affection. "My dearest child, you look lovely. And I am so glad to be back. Vienna always tires me so." And then she rattled on with chatter about her doings in the Austrian capital, until we all went into the house together.

"Normia, dearest, do order me some tea," she said, and turned to me. "Did you see that awful sunset?" she asked, with a shudder as of superstition.

"We were watching it, and as the red light fell on the Valjavo woods I was warned against a shooting I have arranged for to-morrow."

"I wouldn't go there to-morrow for a throne, Guy," she said, with another shiver. "You know our proverb?"

"Yes, I was told it. But I shall go all the same. I shall be there early in the morning and shall return by my usual path about five in the afternoon; and if nothing occurs, you will have to admit the fallacy of your superstition."

Normia was leaving the room as I spoke, and shot a glance at me as I mentioned the hour of my return. Our eyes met for a second, and I half dared to hope that she understood why I had been so precise in speaking of the time.

The Baroness had picked up some letters which had arrived in her absence, and for a few seconds after Normia had left the room did not speak.

Then, very unexpectedly, she fixed her eyes on me keenly, and said: "So you two were admiring the sunset together, Guy?"

"Yes, Baroness." I knew then that Normia had been sent away intentionally.

"Why not Stephanie, Guy? You have called me by the name often enough to know it well."

I laughed uneasily. "There is very little in a name, surely."

"There may be a good deal in your discontinuing to call me by mine, Guy. What has occurred to account for the change?"

"Nothing particular," I replied, with an air of indifference.

"Nothing particular? Nothing particular?" she answered airily. Then, with a sudden change and a quick glance of suspicion: "Is Normia nothing particular?"

"I am not sure that I understand you."

She laughed and shook her head. "Very well, try to think out my meaning and also whether you intend to deal frankly with me, while I glance through these letters. I think you had better be frank."

With a shrug she picked up her letters again, and I turned to the window. It was an unpleasant situation. When I had first come out to Belgrade, Stephanie's husband, Baron Dolgoroff, was living; and they had both shown me the greatest kindness. She was a very beautiful woman, thirty years younger than her husband, and I was a stranger in a strange land. We had met often at dances and so on, and a very mild flirtation

had followed—the mildest and most innocent of flirtations on my side—to be stopped abruptly on a hint from my chief.

Then the Baron had died, and Stephanie had tried to renew the old relations. I had avoided her, again at the prompting of my chief, and I had kept away from the house almost entirely, until I heard that Normia was there. If she forced the explanation now, it must come of course. There was nothing to be gained by reticence; but the situation was, as I have said, unpleasant. And much more so on account of her relations with Normia herself.

"Well?" said Stephanie after a long pause.

"I don't know that I have anything to say."

"Not about the sunset talk?"

"At present, not even about the sunset talk, Baroness."

She frowned at this use of her title.

"I don't think you quite understand the true position of things. Normia is a very sweet, lovable child, devoted to me, and the last soul in the world to do anything I should not like. Do you see all that that may mean?"

"Do you think I should ask her to do any such thing?"

"A diplomatic training has its drawbacks, Guy," she said lightly, but very meaningly. "It is sometimes imprudent to fence a statement of an innocent truth. I am Normia's friend, just as I am yours. You might believe this."

"I have had many proofs of your friendship in the past."

An impatient petulant shrug showed her

disapproval of my reply. "You are speaking from the surface only. Why? I want your heart thoughts, Guy. You know my interest in everything that concerns you. Be candid."

"Very well. I wish to marry Normia."

The avowal thus bluntly made took her so completely by surprise that for the moment she was at a loss how to reply. Then she forced a laugh.

"Well, that is certainly candid. And how long have you wished it? You are apt to be changeable, you know."

"Ever since we met at Carlsbad."

"Dear me! A deeply rooted affection of some weeks' growth!" A toss of the head pointed the flout. "It is indeed a good thing that I came home when I did. Was that your sunset talk?"

"On my side, yes. I was waiting for Normia's answer when you joined us."

I thought I could detect a slight sign of satisfaction in her eyes as she paused a second and then said: "It could only have been a refusal, Guy. I am genuinely sorry for you; but it could only have been a refusal."

"Why?"

She picked up a letter and turned it over as if meditating how to frame her answer. "The best reason for you is that she does not care for you in that way. You have been a pleasant acquaintance——"

"I would rather have her answer from her own lips, Baroness," I broke in.

"There are other reasons than that. She is penniless, and you—well, you are the son

of Lord Helmingcourt, of course; but that does not count for much in Servia. You are Count Mirkov's secretary and enjoy his confidence; but you are not rich, and have all your career yet to make."

"You need not mince matters. I am a poor man."

"There is still more. Certain plans have been arranged for Normia's future, Guy. I cannot tell you what they are. But they would make such a thing impossible to be thought of for a moment."

"I should prefer to see her, Baroness."

"Naturally. You would not be yourself if you did not wish that," she replied with a smile.

"And at once," I added.

"I will go and ask her to come to you now. But you must school yourself for a disappointment."

She was absent a few minutes and returned—alone.

"She would rather not see you now, Guy. Come to-morrow—oh, no, to-morrow you are going shooting. Then the day after. In the meantime, school yourself."

I left the house, combating the belief that Stephanie was keeping us apart designedly. I distrusted her profoundly; but my mind was now firmly made up. Neither Stephanie nor anyone, nor any consideration in the world, should come between me and Normia.

I cursed the mischance by which Stephanie had come out to us just when another second or two would have brought me Normia's

answer; and my heart beat fast as I recalled that after I had told her of my love she had let me take and hold her hand. A hundred times that night I assured myself that if my words had offended her and my avowal been distasteful, she would have given some sign of her feeling.

I thrilled with the hope that I had won her love; and if that were indeed the case, I vowed that not all the powers in Servia should keep us apart.

By the following day my hope had developed into confidence. I did not believe that Stephanie had even gone to Normia at all to ask her to come to me. She had some motive for parting us; possibly no more than a distorted jealousy born of that old flirtation. I would deal with that at once, before she could have time to poison Normia against me. I would go to the house that very evening and have it out with Stephanie and insist on seeing Normia.

In this somewhat truculent mood I was returning from my shooting when, to my intense delight, I saw Normia herself in the pathway leading out of the woods.

I ran to her eagerly, but my first glance at her face chilled me, and brought back all Stephanie's warnings.

She was strangely changed. She was very pale, her face was drawn and lined, the eyes unnaturally bright, and the sockets sunken. The face of one who had passed through hours of mental struggle and searching conflict.

I took her hand and would have held it, but she withdrew it at once.

"I have risked much to come and meet you, Mr. Pershore. I am going away from Belgrade, and—and——" Her lips quivered, and she could not finish the sentence.

"My answer, Normia," I cried, looking into her eyes.

"I dare not, Mr. Pershore—I dare not." Her voice was low and trembling.

"You love me, Normia?" I asked passionately.

She clenched her hands together strenuously and then shook her head despondently, and sighed.

"You love me, Normia," I repeated, insistently. "Tell me that. I care for nothing else. Tell me."

"I—I dare not. I dare not."

"I will not take that answer," I declared. "If you love me, nothing shall part us. That I swear."

"No, no," she cried in deep distress. "I dare not. I cannot tell you why, but I dare not."

"I will not take that answer," I cried again with passionate insistence.

She shook her head. "We must not meet again. I could not let you go without seeing you, but——"

"Then you do love me, Normia. I care for nothing else. I will find a way, let the tangle be what it will."

"No, no. I dare not. If I could tell you, you would understand. But even that I cannot. Please let me go."

"Then tell me you do not care for me," I said, a little brutally.

Her eyes answered me in a sudden flash; but in a second she had recovered herself, and repeated the hopeless phrase: "I dare not—I dare not."

I continued to plead urgently, feverishly, and with all the hot passion of my love. But her answer was always the same: "I dare not. We must not meet again."

"I will not give you up," I cried. "Never. That I swear, until you tell me you do not care for me."

"It is hopeless—hopeless. You will but cause me pain, and worse than pain. If you care for me, as you say, you must not seek ever to see me again."

"I will go back with you now," was my reply.

But at that she cried out in alarm. "You will not be so cruel. The servants must not know why I have come here. It would ruin everything."

"I will not give you up," I said doggedly. I loved her, and, loverlike, felt that the whole world should yield to my love.

"Oh, if you but knew!" she cried in a tone of such despair that my heart bled for her. "Let me go as I came—secretly. Ah, please, please!"

"I will never give you up, but I will find another way."

With that she seized my hand, glanced into my face, and, without another word, turned and sped back along the wood path.

It was Stephanie. I was sure of it now; and my anger against her rose to a white heat

as I paused lest the servants should know of our meeting.

Then suddenly there was a loud cry of distress.

"Help! Help! Guy! Help!"

It was Normia's voice, raised in dire fear, and I dashed off hot foot in the direction of the sound.

CHAPTER II.

STEPHANIE.

THERE was ample need for Normia's cry. As I ran round a bend of the tangled forest path I saw her on the rough road ahead struggling in the grasp of a couple of rough peasants, or footpads rather, such as infest the districts round Belgrade—the Valjavo Woods, where I had been shooting, were some five or six miles from the city—and the pair were so intent upon their work that they did not hear me until I was close upon them.

With the butt of my gun I knocked the nearer fellow down, but the other jumped away and fired a revolver at me. He missed, and I sprang at him. Just as I struck, he fired again, this time with better aim. I felt the bullet like the rip of a hot knife. But my blow told, and he fell with a groan just as I myself went down.

Normia bent over me, her face haggard with fear and yearning pain, and I tried to rise, but could not.

"Call your servants," I whispered—I remembered her carriage must be close at hand—and then some blood came welling up to my lips and my head began to swim.

"Oh, Guy, Guy!" she wailed.

I could just manage to smile. I was on

"IT WAS A SWEET MEMORY TO TAKE INTO THE LAND WHERE NOTHING COUNTS."

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the border line of unconsciousness, and I felt her wipe the blood from my lips and stoop and kiss me.

It was a sweet memory to take into the land where nothing counts.

When I came to myself I lay in a room where all was strange. A doctor was in attendance and two nurses, and he ordered me not to speak, saying that my life depended upon my obedience. I was too weak to wish to resist, too weak even to be curious about my surroundings, but I had no desire to die, and I surrendered myself therefore into the skilled hands of those who appeared to share that desire.

Later on, I asked for Normia, and was told that all was well with her, and that she had brought me to the house in the carriage. But when I asked whose house it was, I was assured that all would be explained when I was stronger.

Days passed, how many I did not then know or care, before the doctor pronounced me out of danger and on the road to convalescence, and still I was told nothing, and my questions were always evaded.

As my strength increased, this evasion fretted me until one day, when I had left my bed and sat looking wonderingly over the quaint city from the deep window of the next room, I insisted upon seeing Normia and being told everything, and declared to the nurse that otherwise I would leave the house. She went away, to fetch Normia as I thought, and I waited in a fever of impatience.

Presently I heard the rustle of a dress outside the door and turned with an expectant smile.

But instead of Normia, it was the one woman in the world I was most unwilling to see, Stephanie, Baroness Dolgoroff.

I turned away sulkily. It was hateful to be under this obligation to her. And it was by her that Normia had been driven to that—"I dare not."

She crossed to my chair.

"Why do you turn from me, Guy?" she asked, her tone one of soft reproach, as though it were her right to reproach.

"I did not expect you, Baroness," I answered, like an ungracious churl. But be gracious with her I could not.

She laughed, a soft, low, indulgent, sweet laugh, as if I were but a petulant child, and she with the reins of my fate in her hands.

"But surely I can't have offended you by saving your life?" And when I did not answer, she added earnestly and with a sigh: "And I have been so anxious!"

"I am sorry I cannot feel as grateful as I should, but I appreciate my obligation."

"You never understand me—you never will! Why talk of obligation when you know the world could hold no sweeter task for me than this?" She sighed again. "Never mind. Treat me as you will. Your recovery is sufficient reward for me."

I made no reply, and she sat down where she could look into my face.

"You are still pale and weak, Guy, but

a living man compared with what you were when brought here. I thought you were dead, and all of us believed you must die."

"Where is Normia?" I asked, looking steadily at her.

"You are not well enough yet for worry, Guy."

"Where is Normia?" At the repetition she smiled.

"As insistent as ever, I see."

"Where is Normia, Baroness?"

"She did very wrong that day, and all this is the outcome. She knows her fault and regrets it. She told me that she drove out to the Valjavo Woods intentionally to meet you, and to say what she did say."

"I wish to speak to her."

"It is impossible. As she told you, she has gone out of your life—for ever."

"Is this your doing?" I asked sharply.

She bent her large lustrous eyes on me and laid her hand on my arm with another indulgent smile.

"How impetuous you always are!"

I shook her hand off. "Are you afraid to answer my question?"

She paused and looked at me thoughtfully.

"No, Guy, you don't think me a coward. What I have done is for the real interest of Normia. What she told you was the truth. You must forget her. It does not seem very difficult for you to forget. I think I envy you the facility," she ended drily.

I knew her well enough to recognise the

futility of saying any more about Normia, and after a pause I leant back as if weary.

"I am very weary. I thank you for all you have done, and shall welcome the chance of repaying the obligation. Will you think me churlish now if I ask to be left alone?"

"Such a wish is law to me," she said, rising at once. She paused by my side and asked wistfully—"Can't you give me one word, or even one glance a little less cold, Guy?"

I hesitated. "I do thank you," I said.

"Oh! A tone of ice!" she exclaimed. "While I——" and breaking off, she stooped swiftly and pressed her lips to my forehead and hurried away.

As soon as I was alone I tried my strength, and found that I could walk without assistance; and when the nurse returned I told her I wished to walk in the garden. After some demur she brought me my hat and coat and a stick.

I loitered by the gates until a carriage chanced to pass. I stopped it and told the nurse that I was going to my own rooms and that she must make my excuses to the Baroness.

She protested vehemently that I should risk my life, but I cut short her protestations by getting into the carriage and telling the man where to drive. I left her wringing her hands and staring helplessly after me.

CHAPTER III.

"YOUR LIFE IS IN PERIL."

My abrupt departure from Stephanie's house came near to costing me my life. I was in a condition of comparative collapse when I reached my rooms; and that night I was in a high fever.

For two months I did not leave the house; and eight or nine weary weeks of convalescence followed before the doctor pronounced me thoroughly fit once more.

That I did not die was due in great measure to my good chief, Count Mirkov, and the care and attention he lavished upon me. Every day he visited me, and himself saw that the best medical skill and nursing to be had in the little capital were employed on my side in the fight with Death.

In all that time I heard nothing of Normia or Stephanie, except from him. I was often delirious; and in my ravings must have mentioned their names freely. Without my questioning him, he gave me news from time to time that tended to reassure me and ease the harassing anxiety about Normia. As soon as I was well enough to bear the strain of an interview with her, she would come to me, he

declared; and it never occurred to me to question his word.

When I gained strength and asked for her, he found plausible excuses. She had been called away suddenly; she was not quite well enough herself for a trying interview; he had not been able to keep an appointment with her to complete the arrangements for the interview; his wife, who was to bring her, was indisposed; and so on. And with this diet of confident hope that all was with her as I would have had it, my strength increased until I was well enough to have the truth told to me.

Vividly, indeed, I remember that day. It was three months since the adventure in the Valjavo Woods. My wound was quite healed, and I was ready to start on a little tour which was to complete my cure. I had only delayed, indeed, in order to see Normia before going away. As soon as he entered my room, I observed that he looked more than usually grave.

"You are feeling strong enough for your trip, boy?" he asked, cheerily.

"Thanks to you, sir, yes. I can never repay your kindness. You have been like a father."

"It has been as much for your own as your father's sake. You had to be pulled round somehow; but I don't know that you'll be so ready with your gratitude when you know what I have had to do."

"Nothing could ever lessen that, sir. You can test me."

He bent a long, searching look on me; his

fingers playing the while with his short, grey beard—a habit of his when he had a difficult task or problem.

"We shall see. But I should do it again. I should have done it, if you had been my own son."

I smiled. "It makes you look very grave, sir," I said, lightly.

"I've got to hurt you, boy; and I don't like it. But Dr. Gregowitch tells me you are strong enough now for anything in reason. In the first place, I haven't told your people in England anything about your illness. Gregowitch was certain from the first that he could pull you round, and you were better in professional hands than in those of fussy friends. The telegram was written out once, when there was a crisis, but you rallied, and it was not sent."

"I am glad. My father is too old to stand a journey out here, my elder brother is too ill, and my sister is married, and as her husband and I have never hit it, he wouldn't have let her come out. Is that all?"

"No. That Dolgoroff woman came pestering here day after day for news of you and tried to force her way into the house. So I gave her a message in your name. She didn't come any more," he added drily.

"I can thank you for that as well," I said with a smile. "I have broken with her for good."

"Yet you came from her house?"

"I was taken there when unconscious, and left it the moment I had enough strength and

found out that—well, that she was trying to keep Normia from me."

"I warned you against her before, more than once, boy. And yet, just before you were hurt, you were at her house."

"To see Normia, sir. That was all."

"Umph! You will mix up with these women," he replied drily. "They'll ruin you if you are not careful."

I turned with a confident smile. "You have seen Normia, and yet can say that?"

His fingers were still playing with his beard, and his shaggy brows almost concealed his keen eyes as he bent them on me. Then, after a pause, he shook his head. "No, you are wrong there; I have never seen her."

My eyes widened in sheer astonishment.

"Why——"

"You were ill—too ill to bear the truth. You are too good a fellow to die from such a cause. I had to tell you those lies about her, and make the pretence about her coming here to see you. They were medical lies, boy. Gregowitch and I made them up, because of what you dropped in your delirium."

For the moment I could not speak. The shock of this news seemed to stun me. Disappointment, rage, resentment, and bitter despair gripped me, and I was a prey to each in turn. I turned away and stared blankly out in front of me at nothing. The room began to swim round me, and I clutched at the arms of my chair as if to steady myself in the whirl of things.

The Count watched me closely and, noticing

my faintness, poured out some brandy and gave to me. I drank some, and it revived me.

"That tells me I did the right thing," he said after a while. "You are a strong man, compared with what you were when all this had to be done, yet we can see how it affects you even now. Gregowitch was right. We saved your life."

"I'm not sure that I thank you for that," I said bitterly.

"Not yet, perhaps, but you will, boy. The world is full of fair women, and——"

"Don't, please," I interrupted. I couldn't bear that.

"Well, we'll talk about her, then. What do you know of her?"

I waved my hand in protest.

"We are going to talk this thing out as—as friends, Guy. Father and son, if you like, but as men. It is the mission of women to give us men the extremes of delight and trouble. But only shallow pated fools die of love for them. And you are no fool. Now, what do you know of this girl except that she is beautiful and that you care for her?"

"Do you know where she is?" I asked, quickly.

"If I did I should not tell you," he replied with a grim smile. "But I can give you my word of honour that I do not. You accept that?"

"Of course, sir."

"Then I'll go a step further and give you another pledge. If you can persuade me that it is for your real happiness and welfare to find

her, I'll help you. But I shall need a great deal of persuasion. More, much more than the fact that you care for her. I am old, and have studied the world and the women in it; you are young, and at the beginning of such studies. I have had my disillusions; yours are before you. And they grit the teeth at your age, boy."

"I shall know no happiness until I find her. That on my oath," I declared vehemently.

"I'll tell you about her. To begin with, she is an enemy of the Government, and your career here would be ended were you in any way associated with her."

I waved my hand again, as if that were the merest nothing to me.

"I am telling you this so that you may think it all over while you are away picking up strength. Her family were mixed up badly in the late revolution. Her father was killed in the troubles, and her mother, her sister, and she herself were for a long time supposed to have shared the same fate. He had pretensions to the throne. He was a prince, or so called himself; he was an Obrenowitz, in reality; but with the bar sinister a generation or so back. He became the catspaw of a section who thought to thwart the army and set him on the throne as their puppet."

"Normia has no such thoughts," I put in, aggressively.

"I hope not," he replied, earnestly. "But we live in strange times. Well, it was only by chance that it was discovered the wife and

daughters had not lost their lives, and were living under assumed names in the country district, close here. They believe they are unknown, but in fact they are under close observation."

"You do not war on women, surely?" I cried, almost contemptuously.

"Spare me your anger, boy. I am talking to you as to a friend. No, so long as they choose to live quietly, they will not be interfered with. They are safe. But the elder girl——"

"Normia, you mean?"

"Normia, yes—has got mixed up with that Baroness Dolgoroff; and that woman is dangerous. I say that in all earnestness, mind. Dangerous not only to her enemies, but more so to her friends. Normia's pretensions to be the Princess Obrenowitz have lately been revived; for what purpose I do not yet pretend to know. But the fact is there, for what it may prove to mean. Therefore I say to you, forget her. Put her out of your thoughts. Go away, go where you will, do what you will, and stay away as long as you will; and use the time to face the position with all the manhood in you. But never forget that your career here is done and over if you seek to nourish this feeling for her—this infatuation."

"Where is the Baroness?"

He threw up his hands. "I do not know. I would not let her remain here in Belgrade. I bundled her out neck and crop, to carry her clever, mischief-making wits to some other country. If she returns here, she will be thrown

into prison, and stop there. We cannot have firebrands of her sort at large here."

He rose then, crossed to my side, and laid his hand kindly on my shoulder. "Take my advice, boy. See the world; mix with people; occupy yourself; don't brood; don't worry; and force yourself, once every day, to look at the matter from the opposite side of the fence. Remember, you will never recover tone by moping. And now, I've only one more confession to make. This came for you during your illness, and I have kept it back until now. Good-bye, boy, and God bless you."

He gave me a letter, and wringing my hand warmly, went away. The letter was from Normia, and ran as follows:

"MY DEAR MR. PERSHORE,—What must you think of me that I have never let you have a single word of thanks! Not that I am ungrateful. I have heard of your illness and have prayed for you night and day. I am leaving Belgrade, perhaps for ever, perhaps to return soon. But in any case we can never meet again. I hate even the pen that has to write the words. Would that I could tell you all! Then I know you would have some kindly thoughts still left for me. But I can only say, as I said that terrible day at Valjavo, I dare not. That and—good-bye. I shall ever pray for your welfare.—Your friend,

"NORMIA."

I read the letter through twice, and then sat thinking it all over. The Count's news

had disturbed me profoundly. In that desolate hour I was very close to despair, and although I resolved to try and take my chief's advice not to brood, my projected journey had become entirely distasteful. I would far rather have remained quietly in my rooms.

Forget Normia I could not, and did not mean to try. But I could do little to find her until my strength was recovered; so I resolved to give a purpose to my tour, and I spent a couple of months wandering from one place to another in search of her.

I was altogether unsuccessful, but I regained my health, and when I returned to Belgrade to take up my work again, I was as strong as ever—quite my old self. The Count welcomed me very cordially, and to my relief did not ask a question about either Normia or Stephanie, nor make a reference to either.

I observed that he kept me very hard at work; and I guessed his reason; and he watched me very closely. In this way some weeks passed, and I fell into the routine readily, and began to find much of the old pleasure in my work. I had no time to make any great effort to find Normia; and such as I could make led to no result. It began to look as if her words were to come true, and that we were not to meet again. Had it not been for my incessant occupation, I should have fallen a prey to profound melancholy. But the work saved me from that, as my old friend had shrewdly foreseen.

I had been back about three months when he made his first reference to Stephanie and

the chapter of my life in which she had been concerned.

"Would you like a chance of winning your diplomatic spurs, Guy?" he asked me.

"Very much indeed," was my ready response.

"Well, it's in this way. You know something of the growing troubles in the army here, and I have just learned that which suggests that a scheme is brewing in which some of the irreconcilables here are carrying on negotiations with some parties in Vienna. We know very little indeed at present; but it is essential that I should have accurate information. I'll send you to Vienna, if you like, to ferret it all out. More than that, I have chosen you to carry on the negotiations to secure the concessions we need in regard to that proposed new line of railway we wish to build for strategic purposes. You know all about that. Baron Vodressy is the Minister in Vienna who has the matter in hand; and as he is an old friend of your father's, you can probably do better with him than anyone else I could send; and you know my wishes completely. But the other purpose is quite as important—to find out, quite secretly, of course, whether the people here are really flirting with some organisation worked from there by that Prince Lepova;" and he went on to give, at considerable length, details of the work to be done.

We discussed the matters very fully, and at the close he said: "There is only one reason why I hesitated about sending you. It is possible—I have no exact information, mind—

but it is possible that you will find your old friend, the Baroness Dolgoroff, in some way mixed up in this. If you have the slightest reluctance about crossing swords with her, don't go. But I should like you to go, because Vodressy will speak more freely to you than to anyone else. And you will, of course, tell him both the objects of your mission. Well?"

"I see no objection on the score of the Baroness," I said.

"You may have to hit her hard, you know."

"I bear her no very good-will, sir," said I, with a grim smile.

"Very well, then, go. Live very privately; in rooms rather than at a hotel; bottom the thing, and prove my confidence in you. If you find that you have to deal with her harder than you care, through the Government there, I mean, then come back; and we'll find someone else to finish the job."

"When shall I go?"

"Say in three days' time; and meanwhile, give it out here that you are not very well, and are going for another health trip. We can't be too careful, for we never know how things leak out."

I went off to my rooms in high spirits. I was delighted with this proof of my chief's confidence, and eager to justify it. I knew that considerable store was set upon carrying out the proposed new railway, and if I could smoothe away the difficulties which the Austrian Government had raised to the scheme, I should really win my spurs.

But I had an even keener pleasure in going

—a personal one. If the chief was right in his guess that Stephanie was mixed up in this plot, I should probably see her, and in that case I hoped at last to learn something about Normia.

I had put it very mildly in saying that I bore Stephanie no particular good-will, and the chief had guessed this easily enough. He had probably reckoned also that, in dropping this hint about her, he would rouse me to special efforts to find her and learn all about her. He was not a man to waste words.

I waited with great impatience for the day of departure, therefore, and set out for the gayest of capitals with a light heart. I took the advice to live very quietly. I found a little flat in the Riesenstrasse where I could have my breakfast, and took the rest of my meals at the Halbermond Restaurant, a very quiet place I had often used on former visits.

The Minister, Baron Vodressy, received me with open arms on account of his old friendship with my father, and I soon had matters well in hand in regard to the railway project.

But with the other purpose I made very little headway. The Baron knew nothing; had not even heard of Stephanie, and was quite in the dark about Prince Lepova and any schemes he might have. But he gave me the names of two men to whom I could go for information, and from them I obtained voluble promises of assistance and certain facts which appeared likely to put me eventually on the track of everything.

I heard no word of Stephanie from them,

however; and as some days passed without any definite results, I began to grow a little impatient.

I was in my rooms one afternoon, thinking all this over, and speculating whether the men to whom the Baron had referred me were going straight, and whether I could not start more definite inquiries on my own account, when I had a genuine surprise.

Without any announcement, Stephanie herself walked into my room.

I started up in astonishment, and then observed that she was intensely agitated and excited.

"I have come to warn you. You are in danger of your life every hour that you remain in Vienna, and it is at the risk of my own that I have come here."

The words burst from her impetuously before a syllable of greeting had passed, and, lost in amazement, I stared blankly at her, as though she or I had lost our wits.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WARNING.

It was some little time before I could throw off the effects of the surprise occasioned by the dramatic suddenness of Stephanie's appearance and the whirlwind impetuosity of her mysterious warning.

That she should know of my presence in Vienna was in itself a puzzle, and that she should have thus pierced the secrecy with which I had thought to hide my movements and been able to come straight to my rooms, baffled me.

That fact of itself was suspiciously suggestive of treachery somewhere; but where—whether in Belgrade or here in Vienna, I could not tell. My thoughts flew to the two men to whom Baron Vodressy had sent me. I had withheld my address, and told them to communicate with me at the Baron's office; but it was, of course, quite possible for them to have followed me to my own rooms.

These things rushed through my thoughts as I was placing a chair for Stephanie, and I put the question to her: "Your visit is a surprise, Baroness. May I ask how you learned of my presence here in Vienna?"

She was in the act of taking her seat, and turned to flash her fine eyes on me with a world of meaning in the glance. "I cannot

tell you. It must suffice that I have come to warn you."

"I think you magnify my danger, but I thank you for the warning, and I can assure you that I am genuinely glad to see you again." I was, but not for the reason I left her to infer.

"Of course, I expected you to scoff at my warning," she replied, "but I did not expect you to pretend pleasure at seeing me, considering that it was at your instance I was turned out of Belgrade."

"My dear Baroness——"

"The request came from the Count, your employer," she interposed.

"The Count, as you know, rules in his own way, and does not consult his secretaries about the means. As a matter of fact, I lay ill in bed at the time, and knew nothing of it until some weeks afterwards."

"I know you were ill. I was denied too often at your doors not to know the result of your flight from my house."

"For that I can only ask your pardon. I behaved with scandalous ingratitude, and all but paid for my act with my life."

"What a diplomatic calm you are cultivating, Guy!" she said irrelevantly, breaking in with a smile. "The Count is a good schoolmaster."

"I am not very much changed, I assure you."

"Still the same knight-errant, hot to court death in saving the fair damosel!"

The cynicism was, I knew, an invitation to me to refer to Normia and give her an indication

of my feelings. I did not walk into the trap. If I was to get the news I wished, I must be very much on my guard.

"I have lived down most of my indiscretions, perhaps," I answered with a laugh. "No man who has to stare death so long in the face as I had, comes quite unscathed from the ordeal."

"You are in greater peril now," she retorted.

"Will you explain?"

She looked at me and smiled meaningly. "How are the railway negotiations proceeding, Guy?" She knew even the object of my presence in Vienna.

"These things move slowly, of course, but I think I shall succeed," I replied with an air of indifference.

"It is because you are likely to succeed too well that I have come to warn you."

"Are you, then, interested in railways?"

She waved my words aside with a vehement gesture. "As if we did not know your real work here!"

"Of course, I cannot pretend to understand you, Baroness."

"You need not pretend to misunderstand. Why have you, of all men, been chosen to hunt us down?"

I gestured as if the question were the veriest absurdity.

"Will you tell me frankly what you are doing here in Vienna?"

"It is no secret, Baroness. As most people know, my father, Lord Helmingcourt, is the life-long friend of one of the Ministers of State

here; that statesman is the one who has the say in regard to these railways, and as I have his friendship, is it unnatural that——"

"An end to all this pretence," she cried, almost angrily. "We are not playing a game, or, if we are, it is a game in which thrones and lives are the stakes, and your life is one of them. You are here to find out for your chief all that can be discovered about the conspiracy which is to restore the throne of Servia to the rightful family, and give back justice and order to that country. You have already done enough to be held dangerous, and if you set a value on your life, take my warning seriously, and either leave Vienna at once or——" She paused, and then repeated, "Leave Vienna."

"And the unspoken alternative?"

"You would not take it. Join our side."

"You do me justice there, at least. I should not turn traitor, nor shall I leave Vienna. Railway concessions do not lead to death, Baroness; at least, until the railways themselves have been constructed."

"Oh, you are mad to treat it in this jesting way."

"I do not treat it as a jest, but I cannot let myself be frightened away. The honours of political martyrdom are for the great, Baroness, and I am only an insignificant person. Besides, I do not take the assassin's knife too seriously."

She paid no heed to this—I doubt if she heard it, indeed. She was thinking intently, and after a pause of some moments she rose with a sigh.

"And I have risked my life to bring you this warning! Is there really nothing I can say to convince you? Oh, Guy, I am almost beside myself with fear for you," she cried, with intense feeling and earnestness. "I know what I tell you is true. I know that danger threatens you. I know that the desperate men whom I am powerless to control have decided upon this terrible step; and you meet me with no more than a jest, a flaunt, and a shrug of indifferent disbelief. For God's sake, listen to me. If you knew what I am suffering!" and she seized my hand and pressed it almost passionately.

"I beg you to be calm, Baroness," I replied, withdrawing my hand. "I assure you I am perfectly able to take care of myself; and while I am convinced that you believe all you say, I am——"

"I only do it because I love you, Guy. For no other soul on earth would I so humiliate myself. See, on my knees I implore you to save yourself while there is yet time."

To my consternation she threw herself on her knees, clasped my hands again, and gazed up entreatingly into my face, her own pale and wrought with agitation.

"I beg you to rise, Baroness."

I spoke coldly, and tried to raise her. But she would neither rise nor release my hand, yielding herself utterly to the hysterical emotion which possessed her, and pouring out her words passionately and with mounting vehemence.

"It is your life I am begging for, Guy. The life of the only man I ever loved or can

ever love. I know I am nothing to you, less than nothing. I have seen that, and have tried, tried, tried to forget; and to persuade myself I had forgotten. For months I have sought to shut out all thought of you. You know I have never given even a sign of my existence. I have plunged into a hundred schemes, seeking distraction and help to forget you. I knew you had come to Vienna, and I kept away, kept secret from you even the fact that I was here. But when I learnt that you were in this danger, my heart would not be denied. I could not keep away. Grant me this one thing. You must save your life. You must! Go away, and I swear to you that never again shall you even hear of me. Never, never, never! But it is your life."

My confusion and distress at this scene were acute. I had tried several times to stem the torrent of her vehement, passionate words, and now, when she paused, I drew back.

"This scene must end, please. It is too painful for us both," I said firmly.

She remained crouching on the ground, her face covered by her hands for some moments, unable to recover command of herself, an abject prey to her emotions. But presently she started as if in obedience to a sudden thought or fresh impulse. She rose quickly.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, and then paced the room excitedly. "Yes, yes. Even that." This was to herself, as though, highly-wrought, she were wrestling with this new thought.

The silence was but little less irksome than her former outburst.

"I can prevail with you now," she said, turning to me suddenly, her eyes shining with an unnatural brightness. "You will not heed me, but what if Normia adds her pleading to mine? Will you go, then?"

The mention of Normia in such a connection was so utterly unexpected that I could not conceal my surprise.

"Normia?" I echoed.

She laughed bitterly. "That should at least convince you of my earnestness. That I deem it grave enough to bring you two together! But you *must* save your life, let the cost to me be what it may."

"I don't affect to misunderstand you, for I know that it was your agency which parted us, but I should be unworthy of her if I were to listen to you. No consideration you could name would cause me to be driven away like a coward."

"Oh, how mad, how blind you are!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Even after this you can believe that I am only trying to frighten you away from the city;" and she resumed her silent agitated pacing of the room.

"I can say no more," she burst out again presently. "I must try and find some other means. I shall go out of my mind if I stay longer. Heaven forgive you for these doubts of me, Guy;" and without a word further, without even the offer of her hand, she hurried out, and I heard the front door of my flat slam behind her before I had recovered from the surprise of her departure.

I am free to admit that her warning created

a very unpleasant impression upon me. I had affected to disbelieve it; but I knew quite well that if my secret mission in Vienna were known to others as it certainly was known to her, I was very likely to be the object of deep animosity on the part of those whom my inquiries threatened.

I was not wholly surprised to find Stephanie in the thing, and if she were taking a leading part she would be quite likely to learn of any danger threatening me. I knew that there were men engaged in the affair capable of planning the "removal" of any inconvenient person, like myself, and there had been more than one suspicious disappearance.

But it was also possible that her visit was no more than the merest bluff intended to drive me out of the city. She might well deem this the simplest way of getting rid of me and my inquiries; and she was such an excellent actress that she would be easily able to outplay me at such a game.

But her last reference to Normia had gone far to convince me of the sincerity of her belief in my danger. After what she had done to part Normia from me she was not likely to have carried a mere bluff to the point of offering to bring us together again.

I had no reason to be afraid for the result of any open attack. I had always kept myself in excellent condition, and I had entirely recovered from the effects of my recent illness. If anything, I was in better condition than before it, because of the strict training I had since undergone.

I felt quite able to hold my own in any rough-and-tumble struggle. I could use my fists, was a practised wrestler, had had more than one fight with knives, and regarded myself as something of an expert with the revolver. Given half a fighting chance, therefore, I had no reason to be afraid.

But this sort of thing was not likely to be attempted in the open; and however tough a man's nerves may be, there is something distinctly "creepy" in the thought of having always to be prepared for a knife-thrust from some dark spot, or a bullet from any favouring corner.

Nor was it a reassuring reflection that the circumstances tended rather to expose me to attack. I had taken a very unpretentious flat on the second floor of the building; I had no servants except the man and his wife who had been in the place when I rented it; and of them I knew nothing beyond the fact that they performed well enough the small duties I required of them.

But I dismissed as improbable the risk of any attack on me in my rooms. It would be too dangerous to anyone attempting it. At the same time I would be on my guard; and I promptly loaded a revolver and slipped it into my pocket. Day and night, so long as I remained in Vienna, that should always be within reach of my fingers.

For the rest, I would avoid being out after nightfall, and keep my eyes as wide open in the daylight as possible; and in pursuance of this resolve, I started off to get an early dinner.

As I left the house I was conscious of a new and extremely disquieting sensation. I glanced about me more than once to make sure that I was not being followed. I scrutinised closely every man who might be loitering for me to catch him up, and whenever anyone overtook me I found means to have a good look at him to satisfy myself that he was not "on the pounce" for me.

It was a profoundly unpleasant mood, and it was not without a considerable effort that I succeeded in shaking it off and laughing at myself for a nervous fool. I did it at length, however, and swung away at my usual pace for the "Halbermond," the restaurant where I generally dined.

CHAPTER V.

THE ASSASSINATION.

A GOOD dinner, a bottle of wine, and a cigar produced a considerable change in my opinion of Stephanie's warning. I began to feel that I had taken it altogether too seriously, and had been over-hasty to shake hands with panic.

Instead of being in such a hurry to frighten myself, what I had to do was to consider quietly and calmly the information I had obtained from her, and its connection with the investigation I had come to make.

It told me much that my chief was anxious to learn. It was clear that a plot to overthrow the government was in the air, and that at the head of it was Prince Lepova. Count Mirkov had told me his suspicion that Lepova was credited with the intention of getting the throne by marrying a princess who would be acceptable to the revolutionary section of the Servian people, on account of her connection with the great family of Obrenowitz—the rival house to that of King Peter. But who this was we did not know.

Stephanie's action I could easily understand. This sort of thing had been the common employment of the late Baron—his profession, so to speak. And during their married life

they had made the utmost use of his title and position, had entertained freely, and had spent money lavishly in carrying on the work of "international agency."

Paris, Berlin, London, Rome, and St. Petersburg had been in turn the scene of their "operations," and so astutely had the wily old rascal covered his tracks that, although suspected of having been at the head of all sorts of conspiracies, he had never been punished. When the plots failed, as they all did eventually, he had always managed to escape from the wreck with plenty of profit, if not with honour. For the latter he cared nothing.

My chief, who had watched them carefully, declared to me in a burst of confidence one day, that the only reason for this could be that theirs was a double treachery, and that whatever scheme they might openly avow, it was never their real object. In his opinion Baron Dolgoroff was one of the most dangerous men in Europe—but dangerous mostly to his associates—and that the wife was more dangerous than the husband. This had been his preface to the blunt statement that I must choose between their acquaintance and his confidence.

What then was Stephanie's present object, and what, if any, Normia's? Could Normia be the mysterious Princess through whom Prince Lepova was seeking to grab the throne? She was an Obrenowitz, it was true, but by the left hand. Would they dare to attempt to use her for such a purpose? Would she consent to be so used? Not of her own account, I was sure; but then Stephanie had that secret hold

over her, and it was possible that it might be used for such a purpose.

I must find this out at once. I had lived in such retirement since my arrival in the city that I had had no opportunity of getting at this; but the means could easily be found. It was obvious that Normia would be putting herself in peril in such an event, and not herself only, but her mother and sister as well. I recalled my old chief's significant words about this; and resolved to get to Normia at once and warn her.

I was deep in these thoughts when a young fellow named von Gartner, with whom I had exchanged a few words at the Minister's Bureau, came up to my table and addressed me by name.

"May I sit here, Mr. Pershore?"

"Certainly, but I have already dined."

"Very early. I don't dine for an hour or more yet. Just looked in to book a table. I'm dining some people. I thought you English were always later than we."

"I had a special reason to-day," I replied, not without a touch of sheepish feeling as I thought of the "reason," and my over-hasty nervousness. I gave him a glass of wine and a cigarette, and he began to chat about the topics of the hour and the people.

"You don't go out much, I think?" he asked presently.

"Not at all. I am here only for a few days until this railway business is settled. I may return any day to Belgrade."

"Rotten sort of place that, isn't it?"

"Scarcely, in my opinion, but then my work is there."

"Hullo! how are you?" he broke off, waving a hand to a man who passed. "Do you know him?"

"No," I said, with a shake of the head. "Who is he?"

"One of the future big pots of the Empire, so everybody says. Count von Kassler. Just been brought from Buda-Pesth to the Ministry of the Interior. The Minister's right-hand man, bang up in his confidence, but scarcely known to a soul outside the Bureau. Devilish handsome chap, isn't he? Some beggars have all the luck. Beastly wealthy, too. Everything to shove him up the ladder."

Amused by my companion's reference, I had a good look at the Count. He did justify the description, and was not only a handsome man, but a very striking one.

"Let's see, we were talking of the Serbs. Funny little people, aren't they? And that reminds me, I wanted to ask you whether you know anything of a Baroness Dolgoroff? I don't know whether she's a Serb or not, but I fancy she comes from Belgrade, and I want to know about her."

"I have heard the name," I said casually. "Is she a very handsome woman?"

"Jupiter! I should think she is! A ripper! Fact is, I was taken to her house a few nights ago by a friend of mine. She does the thing well. Open house and all that. She must be frightfully rich."

"Which is her house?"

"That big black mansion in the Gravenplatz they call the Black House—built of black marble, you know, by that bounder stockbroker fellow, who went broke a year or so ago—Strubenheim. A regular palace. And I say, wasn't there some play going on? Made me open my eyes, I can tell you;" and in this strain he rattled on at considerable length.

I listened closely in the hope that something might come out about Normia, and he was apparently rather flattered by my attention. But no mention was made of her, and at length I rose to leave. He offered to walk with me and show me the Black House, and as the Gravenplatz was in the direction of my flat in the Riesenstrasse, I consented.

"You father's Lord Helmingcourt, isn't he?" he asked as we walked.

"Yes," I nodded.

"I heard so. Great chum of our chief's, they tell me."

"Life-long friends. Fought a duel when they were young and nearly killed each other, and been staunch friends ever since."

"How do you like the chief?"

"You know him better than I do, I expect," said I.

He smiled. "I wasn't fishing. Of course I never see anything of him. From what some of the others say I should think he must be a beast, but not a bad sort of a beast. Hullo, here's the Gravenplatz. I didn't see where we were going in this filthy fog. Aren't the fogs in Vienna beastly? There you are. That's the house I was telling you of, the Baroness

Dolgoroff's ; " and he pointed to a large black mansion on the opposite side of the road which loomed through the heavy mist. " Well named the Black House in such a filthy fog, eh ? "

It was a fine house, the main building flanked by two wings which formed three sides of a quadrangle, and stood a little way back from the road. The general effect was spoilt in some degree by the addition of extra buildings which had evidently been added without plan or thought of architectural symmetry, but rather at the dictates of convenience or fancy.

" A jolly house to have the *entrée* to," exclaimed von Gartner enthusiastically as we turned away. " Baroness Dolgoroff couldn't have been more pleasant to me if I'd been a millionaire. She pressed me to go there whenever I liked and had nothing better to do."

" Did she ? "

I spoke drily, and he noticed the tone. " Do you mean anything by that ? I don't want to make a fool of myself."

He was a frank, genial-looking fellow, very good-looking, and with a most engaging manner.

" Why do you think she made you so welcome ? " I asked.

He laughed pleasantly. " You English have dry ways sometimes. I'm sure I don't know, unless—but I'm not such a prig as that."

" Perhaps you were well introduced. Who took you there ? "

" A Dr. Arnheim, a fellow I met casually at the ' Halbermond.' It could not be that, of course," he said with a shake of the head.

"Perhaps she likes to have young fellows at her house from the Minister's Bureau, then."

"Phew!" he whistled. "By Jove, I never thought of that. I say, I'm awfully obliged to you for the hint."

"I have given you no hint. But I happen to know that your chief likes those about him to keep their eyes open and their lips closed, and he probably keeps his own eyes open, too."

"I say, I'm glad I dropped into the 'Halbermond,'" he exclaimed; adding, after a pause, "I might have gone headlong into a mess."

"How the fog thickens," I said, to change the subject. "I think I shall go to my rooms. The Riesenstrasse is close here, isn't it?"

"I will show you if you like. You might easily lose your way in such a fog."

It was now dusk, and the fog was so thick that we could see scarcely a yard ahead of us. But my companion knew the way, and, taking my arm, led me along with ready confidence.

"This is the Riesenstrasse," he said, as we took a turn to the left; and after some hesitation I made out that we were close to my flat.

"I'm all right now," I declared.

The words were scarcely out of my lips before I caught the sound of footsteps hurrying towards us, and the next moment a big man, walking very rapidly with head bent down, cannoned full tilt into my companion.

He looked up, and instead of an apology for his blundering, rapped out a vicious oath. Then he turned and saw me, and to my intense surprise he started back, and threw up his hands, his eyes opened to the widest, his dark

swarthy skin paled, and for an instant he stared at me as if spellbound. Then with a loud cry he sprang back and darted away at full speed through the fog.

We turned to each other and smiled.

"A queer customer that," said von Gartner.

"He gave us plenty of chance to recognise him again," I replied. "A handsome fellow too in his way."

"Looked like a Bosnian, or a Greek, or something of the sort. But I should know him again. What a yell he let out too. Wild, extraordinary fellows, some of these Balkan brutes. Worse than Magyars. I hate the lot of them."

"You must have a good capacity for hating, then," I laughed. "Here's my flat. On the second floor. Will you come and smoke a cigar?"

"I should like to immensely, and another time perhaps you'll let me. But I have to dress and get back to the 'Halbermond' for that little dinner."

We shook hands and he walked away quickly, the fog swallowing him before I had opened the door and let myself in.

If I had only known what that dinner engagement of his was to cost me I should have forced him into my rooms, if I had had to take him by the throat and choke him into accepting my invitation.

But I did not, of course, so I went on my way up the stairs, just giving a look about me to make sure that no one was lurking around with a little surprise for me. I did observe one thing when I reached the door of the flat. The

key had been left in it. This was odd. At such a time an act of such negligence on the part of the house servants was irritating; and the incident tended to revive in some degree the thoughts of cautiousness as I opened the door.

The flat was all in darkness. Another unusual thing at that hour; and as I switched up the lights I called to the Bragens—the name of the man and his wife who looked after me. Receiving no reply I went into the kitchen, and found it empty. They had both gone out and left the key in the front door so that anyone could have entered. This was more than irritating. It started a suspicion that it might have been done on purpose. I was quite in the mood to entertain suspicions hospitably.

I was glad now that I had that revolver in my pocket.

I went back into the hall, hung up my hat, and turned to the dining-room. The door stood partly open, so, before entering, I put my hand inside and switched up the light.

The light showed me instantly that something very unusual had occurred, and my hand went to the revolver. A couple of chairs lay on the floor, the cloth had been half dragged from the table, the table itself had been pushed out of place, and on the ground close to my feet lay a wallet which certainly did not belong to me.

For a moment I hesitated about entering the room at all, and stood listening. Not a sound. It was as still as a tomb. Calling myself all sorts of a coward, I picked up the

wallet and thrust the door wide open and went in.

Only to start back and catch my breath with a cold shiver of overpowering dismay.

Huddled up in my armchair facing the door lay a man stone dead, with a dagger thrust through his heart. The dark shaft stood out from the breast of the light-coloured travelling overcoat, and told its own grim story.

The man's head lolled on the right shoulder, and as my eye travelled to it from the dagger, I caught my breath again.

The face was the very counterpart of my own. Hair, brows, eyes, features, moustache, beard, all combined to form a positively startling resemblance, when allowance was made for the difference between life and death.

It was as though I were gazing on MYSELF, dead!

For some moments I could not tear my eyes from the sight, but stood staring at it, fascinated by its horror and dazed by the tumult of thoughts it roused.

CHAPTER VI.

FROM THE BLACK HOUSE.

THE murdered man was known to me, of course.

He was my cousin, Geoffrey Pershore, the black sheep of our family. He had squandered his money, sounding every depth of vice and dissipation; and at length he had been cast off as irreclaimable. At the same time he found England too hot to hold him, and had come to the Continent to earn a living by his wits.

He had caused me an infinite amount of trouble as the result of the similarity of name and appearance. He had personated me a dozen times and involved me in no end of disputes in consequence. He hated me; and I returned the feeling cordially. We had quarrelled repeatedly. I had thrashed him more than once, and once he had attempted to take my life.

That he should turn up in Vienna did not surprise me at all. It was his habit to pay me unexpected visits, generally to blackmail me under the threat of perpetrating some fraud or theft in my name. And as just now there was a small sum of money to come to him through my hands—and he was keener than any Armenian after money—he was sure to find me out.

That he should have found my rooms was a little surprising; but he always had strange ways of getting information, and he must

therefore have heard of my arrival through one of these secret channels.

But how he could have come to his death in my room passed my understanding, unless—and I drew a deep breath of cold fear at the thought—unless he had been murdered in mistake for me. If that was the explanation, Stephanie's warning had indeed been well founded.

All these thoughts flashed through my mind in the seconds I stood gazing at him.

At length I approached the chair and examined him to make sure that there was no life left in him. I felt his pulse. Not a sign. The flesh was already cooling with the chill of death, and the hand slipped from mine and fell nervelessly. As I raised the lolling head and gazed into the eyes, glazed and staring in death, the jaw dropped, and I started back.

I took up the wallet next from where I had laid it on the table and read the name—Gerard Provost—in gilt lettering upon it. I recalled that that was one name he had taken in his vagabond life on the Continent, passing as a Frenchman.

I opened the wallet, and in turning over the papers I smeared some of them with blood, and then found that, in examining the body, I had blooded my sleeve and my hand. With a shudder of repugnance I was replacing them, intending to postpone my examination until later, when I read Stephanie's name on one.

Immediately I plunged eagerly into a perusal of them.

I had made a discovery of the utmost moment. My cousin had been one of the Black House spies. He had been to Belgrade, and had just returned with these papers for Prince Lepova and Stephanie, together with drafts for a large sum of money. The whole nature of the conspiracy was laid bare before me; and heedless of all other considerations—forgetful even of the presence of the dead—I read them greedily one after another.

The plot was to the full as audacious as we had believed. The throne was to be overturned; Lepova was to be proclaimed ruler, together with the Princess Obrenowitz; a considerable part of the army was involved; and these letters constituted the report of progress made in Belgrade and the country generally, and gave names and facts and details which would be of invaluable concern to my chief and the Servian Government.

I must leave for Belgrade at once. The nature of the papers was such that I must carry them myself, and they must be in the hands of my chief without delay.

Not till that moment did I give a thought to my own equivocal position in relation to the murder which had been committed in my rooms. How was I to account for it? If I fled without giving warning to the police, I should assuredly be held to have committed it.

The murdered man was my own cousin. Our frequent quarrels were no secret, and would suggest ample motive. I was alone with him. Young von Gartner knew that I had entered the house. I had the dead man's blood on my

clothing. And the deed was sufficiently recent to make it possible that I had killed him.

To fly would be tantamount to a confession of guilt; yet to remain was to render it practically impossible to prove my innocence, and certainly the police, if I called them in, would not let me go.

The thought appalled me, and the agony of the dilemma was indescribable. The indecision and hesitation, as I realised more and more fully the actuality of the danger in which I stood, amounted to positive torture. For the moment I positively could not decide what to do.

As I stood fingering the wallet, my forehead wet with the sweat of terror, thinking like a hunted man what course to take, I heard a key inserted cautiously into my outer door.

It was turned almost noiselessly. There was a movement of feet on the door-mat, as some persons entered with stealthy tread. A man's boot grated heavily on the floor, and someone called "Hush!" very softly. Then the door was closed again, and the bolts pushed softly home.

I was caught, like a rat in a trap; and with my hand on my revolver and my eyes glued to the door, I held my breath and waited for what was to follow.

I had partly closed the door, and stood where I should not be immediately seen by anyone approaching it, and I could not, of course, see them. I could hear the soft tread along the hall, and although every nerve was wrought to the highest tension, I made a desperate effort to regain self-possession.

Then the suspense was broken.

A start and an oath of surprise in a man's deep guttural voice, followed at a moment's interval by a cynical laugh in a lighter tone.

"Why, it's done already! No wonder he didn't hear us." And the next moment the door was flung back. Three men in evening dress stood there staring at the dead body. At the same instant they saw me, and one of them—a slight, spare, fair man with a clever, cruel face, exclaimed:

"What, Provost! Before us, eh? But how the devil did you know this was to be done?"

The other two did not appear to know me. Both were dark, forbidding-looking men, the one tall and sinewy, the other thickset and under the middle height, but both very powerful. They glanced from the speaker to me and asked together:

"Is this Gerard Provost, Doctor?"

"Of course it is. You can tell him by his likeness to the carrion there. Some sort of relations, aren't you?" he asked me nonchalantly.

I nodded. "Yes," I muttered. I accepted the situation instinctively, as it were. My mind was a chaos for the moment. His mistake seemed to offer me the only possibility of escape from the terrible position, and I grasped at it. It might enable me to get away from the house, and I could then decide what to do.

"Well, he's saved us the trouble," growled the taller of the men. "Better see if he's done the thing thoroughly, Arnheim. Looks all right."

And he turned and surveyed the dead man.

I remembered the name as that of the man who had introduced von Gartner to Stephanie's house. The conclusion was clear. These men had come on the grim errand of which she had warned me. If I explained the doctor's mistake, there was little doubt that there would soon be two dead men in the room instead of only one.

I watched the doctor as he made a cursory examination.

"Dead as mutton," he said callously. "But you're a clumsy fool, Provost. Do you suppose a man's appendix is in his chest? Look here, Hammerstein."

The big man with the deep guttural voice crossed to the chair, and the doctor pointed to the dagger.

"Right through the heart for a wager," growled Hammerstein. "He's got a wrist on him, and no mistake. What a stroke!" And he glanced round at me with a certain suggestion of admiration in the look.

I did not in the least understand the reference to my supposed clumsiness in inflicting the death-wound. But I was soon to learn its sinister meaning.

"Hadn't we better get to work?" asked the third man.

"Good Yuldoff! Always an eye to business," exclaimed the doctor. "Why, Provost man, you look as white and ragged as a torn shroud. Find yourself some brandy. These English pigs always have brandy or whiskey about. Pull yourself together. You've done

a good thing; don't be scared. Though how the devil you knew what had to be done beats me."

I pretended to take the hint, and after a search in one or two cupboards, got out my whiskey and drank half a tumblerful neat.

"Always a ready hand at that game, Provost, eh?" sneered the doctor.

I was a very sparing drinker as a rule, and the spirits acted as a powerful stimulant and set my chilled blood flowing again. I was fast getting my hold of the position.

"I can do without any of your sneers, Dr. Arnheim," I said, curtly.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" he jeered. "Your dunghill cock can strut, it seems, then, on the strength of this;" and he nodded toward the dead man.

Self-preservation required that I should show them I was not a man to be played with in that way, so I walked up to him, keeping my eye fixed on his.

"You'll take that back on the spot, Dr. Arnheim, or I'll show you that if you can crow in jest I can use my spurs in earnest."

"Don't be a fool, Provost," he said, not liking my look.

The big man was for interfering, but I caught the doctor by the shoulder and swung him behind me.

"Look here, you Hammerstein, this is between me and that little chattering fool there. Leave it so, or you'll find I'm in no mood to take your interference, and can be ugly."

I took my revolver out of my pocket and

gave him a look which he appeared to understand, for he shrugged his shoulders and turned away muttering.

"Now, doctor, which is it to be—an apology or a mauling?" I said.

He eyed me nervously as I went up to him.

"I didn't mean to insult you, Provost. Don't be such an infernal fire-eater. I'm sorry."

"It's over then. But keep a better guard on that tongue of yours for the future. Now what are you going to do about this affair?"

"Yuldoff, go and see where we had better have the operation," said the doctor. "See where his bedroom is. I expect the Bragens have left everything ready. They had their orders."

So my servants had been in it.

"Operation?" I asked.

He laughed. He had recovered his spirits the moment the dispute with me was over.

"It's a sad case—very," he said, affecting a doleful manner and throwing up his hands. "Poor Mr. Pershore was attacked this evening with violent pains in his little stomach. His watchful servants immediately fetched me, their doctor. I came with my assistant, Hammerstein. We diagnosed appendicitis—not in his heart, though, clumsy—and decided to operate instantly. Unhappily, he died under the anæsthetic; weak heart—heart does come in there after all, Provost—and the day after to-morrow he will be buried to the grief and lamentation of all his friends."

It is impossible to convey an adequate description of his manner in this burlesque. It

sickened me with disgust, while the daring but simple cunning of it almost frightened me. But I dared not show a sign of my real feeling. My one thought now was to get away.

"Well, you won't want me for that," I said.

The doctor was bending over the dead man, and he now held out the dagger towards me.

"Here's your property, Provost. You may need it again. It does its work well."

"I don't want it," I said, drawing back.

"Better not leave it here," growled Hammerstein. "Some inquisitive fool may see a clue in it."

"True; I'll take it," I said; the word reminding me it might be valuable.

As I took it the doctor saw the blood on my sleeve.

"Hullo! Look out, man. You've got some of his blood on you," he cried.

"I can say I got it when helping in the operation," I answered, forcing a laugh and imitating his callous manner. "I'm going now," I added.

"Where?" asked Hammerstein.

At that moment Yuldoff came back to the door.

"It's no business of yours," I replied to Hammerstein.

All three men were now standing in a bunch between me and the door. The doctor glanced up sharply at my reply, and a look of doubt crept into his eyes.

"Have you been to the Black House yet, Provost? Where's the money and the papers you were to bring from Belgrade?"

A more unwelcome question could not have been asked, and in my irritation I blundered.

"Have you become chief since I went away, that I must answer to you?"

"Your manner's devilish strange," he muttered. "You're not generally such a hothead." And he glanced from the dead man's face to mine, and back again.

It was an awkward corner, and a very little would make it dangerous. I tried to turn it with a laugh.

"I'm a good deal excited to-night—that's all. I'm going straight to the Black House, of course."

"Then why couldn't you say so?" grumbled Hammerstein.

The doctor just stared at me fixedly, and I did not at all like the look in his eyes. After a long pause he repeated:

"Have you got those papers and things?"

"Yes, of course I have, in my wallet," I replied, showing it.

But instead of removing his suspicions this appeared to increase them.

"It's devilish funny," he muttered, and took another sharp look at the dead man. "Why did you come here with that instead of going straight to the Black House? And how did you learn that this was to be done?" and he pointed to the dead man.

It was clear that much must depend on my answer.

"I obeyed my instructions—that's all."

"Who gave them to you?" he rapped out sharply.

"You'd better ask the Princess," I returned, making a random shot. And a very bad shot it was.

Hammerstein laughed and Yuldoff shrugged his shoulders incredulously; but Arnheim's face grew harder and sterner.

"There's something more here than we understand," he said to the others; and after another stare at the dead man's face he shook his head. "Do you mean to say that the Princess knew about this, and actually found means to communicate with you before you went to the Black House and told you to come here and anticipate us? Do you know what you're—— By the Lord, it would account for everything," he broke off excitedly.

I saw instantly that the suspicion had taken definite shape at last. It spelt crisis. I slipped my hand into my pocket and held my revolver in readiness.

"What would account for what?" asked Hammerstein.

I held my breath for his answer. If he told his suspicions to the others, I was within an ace of death. He paused, and passed his hand across his forehead. If I was Pershore they would kill me; but if I was Provost, there would be serious trouble for him if anything happened to me.

"What the devil's the matter?" growled Hammerstein, after a long pause. "Are we going to waste the whole night?"

"Everything's ready in the bedroom," declared Yuldoff.

Arnheim drew a deep breath. He had made his decision.

"It'll have to wait. I'm going back with him to the Black House. Something's got to be explained. If I'm right in doubting your story, Provost, you'll understand why." And he gave me a very meaning glance.

"May the devil fly away with me if I do," I answered indifferently.

"You'll come with me to the Black House?"

"As well with you as without you," I returned readily. I reckoned that I could easily account for him on the way.

My willingness appeared to impress him, but he put it to the test immediately.

"You have a revolver there. I shall feel safer if you put it on the table."

"I don't know what the deuce you're afraid of. Here it is." And I tossed it down. My only course was to play the confidence trick for all it was worth.

He picked it up.

"Go and get a carriage of some sort, Yuldoff."

As the man went out I threw myself into a chair.

"Of course, you'll answer for this afterwards, Arnheim," I said.

"Somebody will answer for it," he retorted, drily.

Hammerstein tried to question him while Yuldoff was away, but it was evident that his authority was greater than that of the others, and he held his tongue.

Yuldoff was soon back, and then Arnheim,

as if he had read my secret and guessed my intentions towards himself, quietly checkmated me.

"We are all going," he announced. "You two each take an arm of Provost's and I'll bring up the rear. He may have forgotten the way to the Black House."

I could have cursed his caution, but any attempt at resistance was useless then. So I put the best face I could on matters.

"You make me a prisoner, then?"

"If I'm wrong I can give you my reasons and apologise afterwards. You'll be the first to say I'm right and to thank me The Prince will say I'm doing right."

"You may not relish the form my gratitude may take," said I, drily.

A minute later we were all four on our way to the Black House, and the outlook for me was blacker than ever.

With Arnheim to start the suspicion there, it was impossible that I could escape detection, and the moment of my recognition would inevitably be one of the gravest peril for me.

CHAPTER VII.

HOPELESSLY ENSNARED.

THE drive was a short one, and when we pulled up under the great portico Hammerstein and Yuldoff linked their arms in mine and led me into the house in the same fashion they had brought me out of my flat.

We passed through a wide hall where a number of servants and others who were in attendance stared at me curiously. From that we turned at right angles along a broad corridor, and entered a room near the end. The lights were switched up, and Arnheim went away, leaving me in the charge of the other two.

Ask a question I dared not, of course. To have shown any ignorance of the house would have betrayed me. I endeavoured to assume a manner of indifference with a dash of indignation at my treatment. But the situation tried my nerves to the utmost.

There must be, of course, dozens of men about the place who would be able to detect the difference between Provost and myself in an instant; and what would follow, where men were as desperate as these, was certain enough.

Even if the imposture were not discovered, matters were about as ugly as they could be. The inference that, as Gerard Provost, I had murdered myself, Guy Pershore, had been

drawn instantly by these three men, and everyone would jump to the same conclusion. I could only hope to save myself for the time by fathering that deed; and if I did so, any hope of afterwards clearing myself would become ten thousand times more remote.

On the other hand, if I were recognised as Guy Pershore, I should be held answerable for the death of Provost, their comrade. I should be known to have taken possession of his papers, and so to know all the secrets of their plot. If, before this, they had deemed me dangerous enough to seek my life, there was not even an infinitesimal chance that they would spare me now.

It seemed that whatever happened I must be irretrievably ruined, even if my life were not immediately taken. All the influence of my father's old friend, the Minister, could not prevent my having to stand my trial for murder; and to prove my innocence, after the fatuous things I had done, would baffle the wit of man.

For over an hour I sat in this distracted mood, seeing nothing ahead but death in some shape, either by the men I was trying to fool, or by my own hand. I welcomed even Arnheim's return as a relief from the gloom of those thoughts.

He beckoned to the others and they led me back through the hall, up a broad stairway to the floor above, and, without having said a word, they ushered me into a room where, to my astonishment, not Prince Lepova, but Stephanie alone was awaiting me. She sat at a table littered with many papers.

Her eyes were flashed on my face as I entered, and I saw by the look in them, and the nervous start she gave, that she recognised me. But the start was instantly repressed, and she affected to finish the reading of one of the papers before she looked up again.

She was a consummate actress, and she glanced at Arnheim, who was watching her eagerly, with a smile of reassurance; and then turned an impassive face to me.

"Dr. Arnheim brought me a singular story, M. Provost. As, except to myself, you are known to scarcely any of us, and even to them only very slightly indeed, he was inclined to be misled by the strange resemblance you bear to the enemy of our cause, the Englishman, Guy Pershore, who has paid for his enmity with his life. That is the reason why you have been brought here so unceremoniously. You have but to ask him and he will, I know, offer you an ample apology."

It was very clever. It put me in possession of the facts, and at the same time left me to declare the truth if I dared. I turned to him.

"Well, Dr. Arnheim?" I said.

"You are quite sure?" he asked.

She frowned and her nostrils dilated slightly in anger as she glanced at him.

"I am not sure that I understand that question, Dr. Arnheim. Once before I had occasion to speak to you on the subject of your doubts of M. Provost, remember."

"I will find means to deal with this gentleman later on," I said.

"I will have no quarrelling, M. Provost,"

she returned sharply. "You must bear in mind that the doctor has our cause at heart to the full as earnestly as you can have. His doubt was quite excusable. If you had been the Englishman, you would have had to answer for the death of our comrade and follower. You will give him the assurance he asks, if you please."

There was no help for it, so I made the avowal.

"Of course I am Gerard Provost," I declared hotly. "And he shall answer to me for this."

"Doctor!" said Stephanie.

"I am satisfied. M. Provost, I apologise to you for my mistake, and for all that has occurred in consequence," he replied, and offered me his hand.

"I don't want your hand and won't take it."

"M. Provost, I insist," said Stephanie.

"That makes no difference to me. This is a personal matter and concerns us two alone." Take the fellow's hand I would not. With a shrug he turned away.

An awkward pause followed, broken by Stephanie. "You have the papers from Belgrade, Monsieur?"

I emptied the wallet and gave her the contents.

"I have to question M. Provost privately, doctor. Let the Prince know now, and ask him to come to me." With that the three men left the room.

As soon as we were alone Stephanie laid down the papers and looked at me.

"Can I go now?" I asked.

"I have just risked everything to save your life. Is that your answer? Where would you go, to whom, and to say what?"

"Can I go?" I repeated. "Or am I a prisoner still?"

"Seeing that I have just freed Gerard Provost, that is——"

"An end to this pretence. You know me well enough," I broke in impatiently.

"I know you to be Gerard Provost"—I waved my hand in protest, but she took no notice of the gesture—"but of course if you prove me to be mistaken, you leave me only one alternative. I must let my friends know of that mistake. If you were Guy Pershore—the man whose death stands as a glorious credit to you as one of us—then you would have to answer for the death of Provost, for your possession of these papers, and for your knowledge of all our plans."

"But you know the truth perfectly well."

"I do not dare to know more than that you are Gerard Provost. You have read these papers, of course?"

"Yes."

She lifted her brows and shrugged her shoulders. "Then how would you act were you in my place?"

"What are you going to do?" I asked after a pause.

"I will do my utmost to save your life, but you must not make it impossible. You cannot go free from here as Guy Pershore; you must be content, for the time at least, to be

known as Provost, our follower; and you must pledge me your sacred word of honour not to reveal a syllable of what you have learnt from these papers."

"I am to be one of your spies, you mean?"

"He was little else, it is true; spy and messenger, but trusted. You will have a different part. I have great influence, and you will be known to have my confidence. I can save you from the desperate men among us in no other way. Besides, if you were to be free to carry this news to your chief, the lives of hundreds of others would be jeopardised. No. That door of escape for you is close shut and double barred," she cried vehemently.

"You threaten my life, you mean?" I returned bluntly and moodily.

"Is that fair? Did I not risk everything to warn you, and you laughed at my warning? Have I brought about this present position? Did I bring you here? Have I not just acted and spoken this lie to save your life, betraying all these who trust me? Did I not leave it open to you to declare yourself? Hate me if you will, and scorn me; but be at least honest. And it is not honest to use my covering words to escape an avowal before the rest, and now that we are alone to look to me to let you go, that you may carry the news you have gained to our enemies."

"What are your terms, then?"

She paused and dallied with the papers before her, then looked me full in the face as she answered slowly: "I have no terms. You have created the position, and must do as you

will. You are either Guy Pershore or Gerard Provost. You cannot be both. You are free to choose, but the choice must be final."

"Plainer, please."

"If you are Guy Pershore you will have to answer for the death of Provost. If you become Gerard Provost, then Guy Pershore is dead. You know how it has been arranged to account for his death. The cause of death will be formally certified, the funeral will take place and all suspicion of the manner of his death will be buried with him as completely as all knowledge of his real identity. You will never again be other than Gerard Provost."

"It is maddening, devilish!" I cried, beating impotently against the net which held me hopelessly in its power.

"Why did you kill the man?" she asked suddenly.

"I kill him! I had no more to do with his death than a child unborn. I found him dead in my rooms on my return there."

She dropped her eyes on the table. "It is at least a strange coincidence," she said significantly. She did not believe my protest. "You had quarrelled often?"

I laughed in sheer bitterness. "Say at once you don't believe me."

"What I believe is of no avail. To Arnheim and the others you accepted the responsibility for his death. You were in possession of his papers. Your hands were stained with his blood. If you are innocent, how can you clear yourself—I mean in the judgment of others?"

I began to pace the room a prey to overwhelming agitation. Every word she spoke in cold deliberate tones went right home. It was the verdict everyone would give upon the facts. "I cannot clear myself," I groaned. "I know it. I cannot. To try and face it now would mean conviction. You have me fast bound in your toils, and may well gloat over your triumph."

"I am as far as the poles are asunder from gloating over you, Guy. If I can help you, I will. Surely, surely I have proved that," she cried with a passing wave of excitement. "But this is as much to me as to you; to my life as to yours. And time is pressing. You must decide. Will you pledge your honour not to reveal your identity and what you have learnt?"

I hesitated and then agreed. I had no option. "Yes. I pledge my honour."

"And the rest. Are you Guy Pershore or Provost?"

"Can't you see all that it means to me? I must have time to think."

"It is not in my power to grant it. Prince Lepova will come at any moment, and I must say you are Provost or that I have been mistaken."

"I can go before he comes."

"Yes, if you tell me in what character you go."

"I will go," I cried, resolving like a coward on flight.

"It will not help you to try. Nothing can save you unless you join us."

"I *will* go," I repeated; and was hurrying to the door when it was opened by a tall, slight, distinguished-looking man of some forty years of age, with a thin, strong, saturnine face, and a pair of the blackest and most piercing eyes.

"Ah, your pardon, Monsieur," he said courteously, his singular eyes expressing considerable astonishment at my ruffled, agitated looks. "M. Provost, doubtless?"

I drew myself up and returned his look in silence.

"Monsieur," said Stephanie, rising, "Prince Lepova spoke to you. You must decide now, if you please."

The Prince came into the room and closed the door behind him.

"They told me you wished to speak to me, Baroness." His looks from one to the other of us showed his perception of an undercurrent between us which he did not understand.

"It was to hear this gentleman's decision, Prince."

"A decision of Monsieur—— ?" He paused, and turned to me with suspicion as well as perplexity in his eyes.

I drew a deep breath and clenched my hands in the strain of that moment of fateful decision, and my voice was husky with emotion.

"Gerard Provost, M. le Prince."

My emotion mystified him.

"Of course. I was told you were here. And the decision—what is that?"

Stephanie came to my rescue.

"There is a little more under the surface

than we can explain for the moment, Prince," said she, contriving to imply in a smile that there was some personal understanding between her and myself which was for the time a secret. "Before he went on this journey, something passed between us involving a great change in M. Provost's position among us. He did not wish the matter mentioned yet; I, on the other hand, wished to let you be the first to hear of it. He was hurrying away as you entered, and so I think it had better be deferred. It will be enough if I say that M. Provost has now my entire confidence, Prince."

What did she mean? Was it just an excuse to meet the momentary difficulty? Or had she some subtler purpose? The Prince took the latter view.

"Your confidence, Madame, is something we may all strive to deserve. Allow me to congratulate you, M. Provost"; and he held out his hand.

I took his hand, without meeting his eyes, and mumbled my thanks.

"You are wearied, Monsieur?"

"He has not slept for two nights, Prince," said Stephanie, making up her story with smiling glibness to cover my embarrassment. "We can well pardon his somewhat disordered looks. After his last great services to your cause, you will have no firmer or more faithful adherent than M. Provost. His whole interests in life are now wrapped up in the cause."

He acknowledged this with another bow and then asked to see the papers. She handed them to him, and he read them greedily and with

an occasional exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

Stephanie pretended to occupy herself with other papers, and I sat watching them both furtively. The die was cast; I had chosen my course, and I had saved my life for the time; but I was weighted by a sense of shame and wretchedness, oppressed, beaten down, overwhelmed by the calamity that had fallen upon me. I was unable to think, and so dazed that the whole terrible scene appeared to have no more actuality than an appalling nightmare.

"You have indeed done well, M. Provost," exclaimed the Prince at length. "First to get all these, and then to bring them safely to us. Permit me to echo Madame's expression of confidence. There are those among us who have doubted you, I know; but these, and your deed of to-night, will silence everyone—in my hearing, at least."

I had sunk low indeed when I could hear this open reference to my supposed commission of a murder and yet utter no protest. But I was conscious of no feeling now save a maddening desire to get away and be alone to think; to face things by myself and seek some ease for the burning torture of my humiliation. But there were still deeper stabs to be endured.

Stephanie looked up from her papers and smiled.

"Ah, Prince, the reason for those past doubts of M. Provost is in large part the cause of his present success. So far this has been known only to myself; but you should know it now. M. Provost has often successfully personated

Mr. Pershore, even in Belgrade. Have you not been taken for him generally, Monsieur ?"

"Yes," I said, thinking she merely wished to rivet indissolubly my chains.

But her motive was to show later.

"It was in that character I first knew him, Prince. He rendered a great service to our cause in a way that instantly won my confidence and regard. You know that I can read men."

He bowed and spread out his hands.

"Your shrewdness has been amply justified in this case, Baroness," he replied, touching the papers.

"I wish him to enjoy your confidence equally and that of the Princess."

"M. Provost can rest absolutely assured."

"I am very weary," I broke in, sick to death of the scene.

"Do you not think the Princess should have an opportunity of thanking personally one who has rendered her such conspicuous service ?"

I tried to catch her eye with a protest, but she avoided me.

The Prince rose.

"She is close at hand. I will ask her to come here."

"You might have spared me this last humiliation," I cried indignantly when he had gone out.

"It is no humiliation, and it is necessary. You must know whom it is you serve, and whom you will ruin if you attempt to break away from us."

I leant my head on my hands and groaned.

"Don't give way, Guy. Listen. I swear

to you that I will cause the strictest inquiry to be made into the circumstances of Provost's death, and if you keep faith with us, you shall be cleared from suspicion of having caused it. I swear that."

"It is too late," I murmured with a deep sigh.

"If you had only had faith in my warning and fled, all this would have been avoided. Do try to believe now that I have no wish except to be your friend."

"Friendship!" I echoed. "What is that but a part of all this grim mockery?"

"My acts shall make you unsay that, and —my love, Guy," she declared, earnestly.

"For Heaven's sake spare me any such added shame as that implies."

She winced at this, but did not reply. Presently she said, as the door opened:

"Here is the Princess."

I rose, and a cry of astonishment escaped my lips.

It was Normia!

At my cry she looked up. She went as pale as death when she recognised me, and pressed her hand to her forehead.

Being alone, I did not realise that she could be the Princess, and I went towards her with hands outstretched.

But she shrank from me; doubt and infinite trouble in her eyes; while her look of fear as she glanced at Stephanie made my heart bleed for her.

Then the Prince followed and stared from one to the other of us in quick suspicion and mounting anger.

Stephanie broke the silence.

"Princess Normia is Prince Lepova's promised wife," she said in a clear, unruffled tone. Then to the Prince: "This gentleman once saved Normia from a great danger, Prince—saved her life, probably. But she believed him then to be Mr. Pershore, the Englishman, who has just died. That was the service I referred to a minute since. Will you present him now in his real name?"

In a flash I realised the full infernal cunning of the stroke, and that I was branded as a scoundrel and a murderer in Normia's eyes.

A hot, passionate protest rushed to my lips. But I dared not utter it. I was too fast in the toils. To tell the truth was to court inevitable death. The only possible means of yet saving Normia from the ruin that I now saw threatening her, was by the tacit compliance in this horrible lie.

With a moan of anguish I hung my head in very shame as the Prince was uttering the formal words of presentation.

Then Normia's voice roused me, and I looked up.

"What is your name, monsieur?" she asked, her eyes full on mine, with a wistful, eager light in them, as if—or so it seemed to me—she would only accept my condemnation from myself.

I hesitated, and the other two looked searchingly at me.

There was no escape. The cup of bitterness must be drained to the dregs.

"Gerard Provost, Princess," I stammered,

my voice low and unsteady. "Always, I trust, your devoted servant."

For an instant she gazed at me as if she would not believe even my own words against myself. Then, with a start, she drew herself up, bowed coldly, and placing her hand on the Prince's arm, left the room.

I understood. She had passed out of my life for ever.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD.

Of the events of the week following my cousin's death I have little recollection beyond a blurred sense of nightmare horror and sickening anguish of mind. I know that I must have been close to the border-line of insanity; and that I did not destroy myself was due to nothing but the thought that by living I might yet be able to help Normia.

That even that prevented me has always been a source of marvel to me.

I remained all the time in my rooms, Provost's rooms, of course, to which I had been directed by Stephanie. I was utterly and abjectly forlorn. I touched scarcely any food, but spent hour after hour, day after day, brooding incessantly over the fate which had befallen me, and lamenting with the bitterest self-reproach the crass blundering which had wrecked my life.

Everything I cared for in life was gone, nor was there the slightest hope of ever regaining it. The arrangements for accounting for my death were carried out. A supposed operation for appendicitis was performed by Dr. Arnheim; it was given out that I had not rallied from the anæsthetic; and after the funeral had taken place the full account of my death appeared in the newspapers.

I read the accounts myself, pored over them, indeed, with a sort of gruesome fascination; and read other paragraphs about my career—eulogistic references to my services to the Government of Servia, together with more or less eloquent regrets that so promising a life had been cut short by the hand of death.

Guy Pershore was dead, and it was Gerard Provost, the spy, the scoundrel, the wastrel vagabond, that read of his death. Doomed to a life of infamy, lies, and bondage, I pored over the story of my merits and promise, maddened by its irony and suffocated by its shame.

A dozen times a day the revolver barrel was pressed to my head, and my life hung on the whim of the moment; and the trigger would have been pulled and the thing ended but for the thought of Normia.

I abandoned all hope of ever clearing myself from the charge of murder. I could only do that by finding the real assassin; and although I had one clue—the dagger with which the deed had been done—there was not one chance in a thousand million that I could find its owner.

I was chilled and appalled by the sheer impossibility, and resolved to sicken myself no longer with cheating hopes. And with the abandonment of hope I began to grow calmer. I ceased to think of the futility of struggling and to be impotently angered by it. Resignation to the inevitable took its place, and I surrendered myself to face death as a certainty.

I fevered myself no longer by the maddening alternations between hope and despair. It was not a question whether I could escape, but only

when I would die. Continue to live as Gerard Provost I would not. Every instinct of my nature rebelled. I should be a paltry scoundrel, a sham, a coward, a walking, living lie; and the shame of the thought heated my blood like a fever.

The one consideration was whether, by playing the part for a few days, I could help to free Normia from the danger that threatened her. I could endure the shame for such a purpose, and I began at last to consider what steps I could take.

But for two days after I had first entertained the thought, I shrank from it like a scared child, for the reason that I should have to meet other people in the character of Provost. I shrank from the actual contact with others with an abhorrence and dread it is impossible to describe.

I had shunned even the woman who brought my food and cleaned my rooms. I sat with the door locked, and would not let her enter the room where I was. Letters and messages came from Stephanie; but the letters I tore up unread, and the messages I would not even suffer to be repeated through the locked door. My meals were only brought in when I had retired to the inner room.

Stephanie herself came twice during the week, but I would not give a sign that I was even alive, until they knocked violently, declaring they would break in the door. Then with a fierce oath I swore that I would put a bullet into the head of anyone who tried to break in upon my privacy.

"I SAW ON THE PAPER THE WORD: 'NORMIA.'"

(*Page 83.*)

In a word, I was all the time on the border-line of insanity, and I should have crossed it, or killed myself, but for the reason I have stated.

Stephanie's second visit was on the last day of that condition of mental torpor, and it was only a small thing that really roused me.

I had been standing at the window watching the people in the street and wondering when, if ever, I should gather courage to go out amongst them, and feeling that each one who passed had the thought in his mind that shrinking from sight behind the curtain of my window was a murderer; and as I turned away my eye fell on the wallet in which the papers had been brought from Belgrade.

In an impotent paroxysm of rage I seized it and began to tear it to pieces. I was beside myself with insensate, irresponsible fury, and tore at it as though it were indeed the cause of all my trouble.

Then between the outer leather and the lining I caught sight of a white paper, and wrenching the lining away I saw on the paper the word:

"Normia."

No other word; but folded inside were notes for a considerable sum.

I laid both paper and notes on the table and stared at them, with hands pressed to my head, as I sought to force my poor trouble-crazed wits to think out the meaning of it.

I have often smiled in self-pity at the tremendous mental effort it cost me to draw the simple and obvious conclusion that Normia

must have given Provost a secret mission to Belgrade, and that this was the answer to it.

But I could not attempt to solve the other questions suggested by the discovery; how there could have been a secret understanding between them; how she could have entrusted such a thing to him seeing that she had never seen him; what her message to Belgrade could have been, and what so extraordinary a reply meant. All I understood then was that she must be in need of this message and money, and that I must do my utmost to get both to her without delay.

Here was something to do, and it constituted just that impetus to action which I needed. For the first time in all those black days of horror a definite purpose was formed, an actual and practical step was forced upon me by which I could help Normia.

With the thought of preparing myself to go to her, I went into the bedroom and looked into the mirror. I was a sorry object indeed. I had not even washed myself in all that week. My hair was matted and tousled, my face drawn and lined, my eyes sunken and shining with an unnatural light. In that one week my face had become that of an old man.

The change had one good result, I thought, with a bitter smile. No one would recognise in such a scarecrow the somewhat dandified Guy Pershore. Nor would anyone be looking to find differences between me and Provost.

But the thought that I had found something which I could do for Normia roused me. I bathed and dressed myself carefully, and then,

not without a tremor of nervousness, I summoned the woman of the house.

She started, and began to tremble violently at sight of me.

"Lord, how you are changed, sir!" she exclaimed.

"I have been very ill, my good woman, but am better," I answered, very quietly. "Bring me some food and wine."

"You look so ill; mayn't I fetch a doctor?"

"No, thank you. I am quite myself once more. Tell me who has been for me in the past week."

"Only two have given their names. A Dr. Arnheim, who said he called at the request of Baroness Dolgoroff; and a Herr Andreas Vosbach. A lady called with the doctor yesterday, when they tried to get you to see them. And there was a young woman, like a Greek she seemed to me, who said she had heard that you were dead, sir."

"I am a long way from dead, now; but I was very near it more than once. But bring me the food and I will show you by eating it that I am very much alive."

I was suddenly conscious of a ravenous hunger, but I was prudent enough to eat and drink sparingly and slowly; and feeling much refreshed, I went out as soon as it was dusk to buy myself some clothes and get rid of the distressing feeling that I must shrink from my fellow-creatures.

For an hour or more I walked about the streets, gradually shaking off the eerie strangeness and conquering the intolerable impression

that everyone who looked at me was associating me with that gruesome deed in my rooms.

Putting constraint upon myself I entered a restaurant at last, and sat smoking over a mug of beer, watching the smiling faces, listening to the sallies and loud laughter, with a curious sense of detachment and isolation. It made me melancholy. I envied the laughers, even while I wondered how they could laugh.

But I forced myself to remain until the feeling began to wear away, and at last I myself even smiled at a jokelet which I overheard from a table close by.

I beckoned a waiter, intending to leave, when from a group behind me I heard a name which I remembered.

"Trust Andreas Vosbach for that," was said with a chuckle.

It was the name the woman had mentioned as that of one of my callers, and instead of leaving I ordered another mug of beer and sat on to listen.

They were discussing some little incident in which a girl was concerned, and this Andreas Vosbach was talking boastfully of what he had done. He impressed me very unfavourably.

They sat long, but as I could not leave without passing their table and so risking recognition by the fellow, I stayed. When they broke up and I thought they had all gone, I rose. One man remained alone at the table, and when he saw me his eyes lighted with a look of slow recognition and surprise, and he rose and came to me.

"What the devil! Provost! Is it really

you? Why, they told me at your rooms you were dying or something. And you look it, too."

"I have been ill; unnerved and almost out of my mind."

He seized my hand and pressed it, and with a glance around to make sure that no one could hear, he whispered:

"I know the reason. We did not believe you had the courage. It will make you with them. They will be careful in the future how they jeer at you."

He referred of course to my supposed assassination of myself. "I shall take my own line," I answered equivocally.

"Can we go to your rooms? We can't talk here," he asked; and I assented.

During the walk I observed that he looked constantly at me, as if noticing my walk, carriage, manner, and general appearance. Something about me perplexed him.

"Why did you grow your beard?" he asked presently.

"Belgrade. The Englishman Pershore carried one."

"I never saw him," he said, less truly than he thought. "You've all new clothes."

"I got some ugly stains on the others." It proved an effective reply. He gave a little shudder as he shot a furtive glance at me, and said no more until we were in my rooms and my hat was off.

"Heavens, but you are altered, Provost. Not like the same man," he cried.

"I am not the same man, Vosbach," I

answered with a slow smile. "I shall never be the same man again—at least I shall never again be the man you and others have known. There is a new Gerard Provost, and I have shed for good and all the character as you saw me play it."

I spoke so earnestly and fixed him with such a deliberate stare that he was obviously impressed. He was a full-fleshed, flabby-featured sort of fellow, and his tell-tale face was easy to read.

"What do you mean about playing the character?"

"That the man you have known was not the real Provost, no more than one of the parts I have had to play in my career as spy. But I have come to my own now."

"I have certainly never seen you in this mood before," he muttered uneasily.

"You will see it often in the future. This deed of mine has made me throw off the old part of coward, and you fellows will have to take me as I am now, or there will be some quarrelling. And now, to business." I deemed it best to appear to take the lead in whatever he had come to talk about; although of course I had not the ghost of an idea what it was.

"It's an infernally rum change in a man," he murmured, as he threw himself back in his chair and stared at me.

"That's enough about myself. I tell you I have been devilishly near losing my wits, and I don't care about the subject."

"All right, only it takes some getting accustomed to."

"Then you'd better hold your tongue until you *are* accustomed to it."

He was inclined to resent this and sat up quickly and looked at me, but thought better of it, and, with an uneasy laugh, lapsed into silence for some moments. Then he asked in a nervous, tentative manner: "Does the change mean that you don't intend to go on with us, Provost?"

"In what?"

"About the Princess."

I pricked up my ears. "I am the same as ever in regard to that," I said.

"I am glad," he exclaimed with an air of relief. "Only when you did not come to Grundelhof's to the meeting and wouldn't let me see you when I came here, I couldn't understand. But I see now. What news have you brought from Belgrade? We thought it was all right because Catarina says that Alexandrov is back in Vienna. Will the money be all right?"

"Yes, that's quite certain," I answered at random. It was all jargon to me. "What have you done in my absence?"

He laughed. "What could we do, man? Particularly as Catarina has been sent away from the Black House. I suppose you know that?"

I was quite at sea and let the question pass with a slow smile of indifference, and a wave of the hand.

"Did you bring the money?" he asked next.

"Little or none, it's to follow in a day or

so. You can take it from me that it will be paid to the last coin."

"Good. Then there's nothing to do but settle the actual plan of carrying her off. Are you still resolved to have nothing to do with the actual abduction?"

"It will depend on the plan. Have you any new one?"

"Yes, I thought of one," he replied eagerly. "They guard her like a lynx at the Black House; and now that Catarina is no longer there we might have to wait a devil of a time for a chance. My idea is to choose some night when there's a ball on, and let one of us get a dance with her and lead her out to where Alexandrov would be waiting. He'd do the rest."

"Not a bad plan, Vosbach. What say the others?"

"I can't make Grundelhof out. He and Baumstein suspect you of going back on us for one thing; and for another he hinted the other night that you had only been brought into the thing because of your influence with Catarina. They seem to have taken me in order to get you; and you, because Catarina might make it easy to get the Princess. Of course they daren't throw us over openly because we know too much. But Grundelhof's a brute."

"I shan't let him fool me," I said sternly, wondering who he was.

But my companion only laughed. "It's all right to talk big, old fellow, but he could eat the two of us. I wouldn't tackle him alone for a fortune."

"Well, we shall see. And now I'm going to send you off. I'm simply done up for want of sleep."

"You'll come to the next meeting, all right?" he asked as he rose. I nodded, and at the door he turned and with a leer asked: "By the way, what are you going to do about Catarina?"

"Nothing."

He shrugged his fat shoulders and the leer broadened to a grin. "If she'll let you, you mean. She's a Greek, don't forget, and you used to be frightened enough of her. She mayn't accept the change in you as easily as the rest of us."

"I can manage my own affairs, Vosbach. Good-night."

He gave a long, curious stare as he bade me good-night, and with a mystified shake of the head, went away.

I was glad enough that I had let him come home with me and talk. The fact that I had been able to pass myself off with him as Provost was an earnest of success with others. He must have known Provost pretty well; and no doubt the change in my appearance had seemed to him possible as the result of my illness. But it was clear that Stephanie did not know all the people who knew Provost, any more than she knew the undercurrents of intrigue among them.

The thought that I should be engaged in a plot to carry off Normia in the interests of somebody in Belgrade made me smile. But it was nevertheless almost providential under the

circumstances, as it would enable me to thwart it. But it made it more important than ever that I should get a chance of talking to her and putting her on her guard.

There was, however, one fresh danger ahead now; this Greek girl, Catarina, whoever she was. I might impose on the other men as I had imposed on this fellow, but if Provost had been making love to her, she would know the trick the instant her eyes fell on me. And the discovery would lead to heaven knew what complications. She was in touch with some of the men who believed that I had committed the murder; they would tell her of the strange likeness; and she would certainly debit me with the murder of the man she loved.

What a Greek girl, mad with rage against the man who had slain her lover, would do I could only leave to my imagination. But the resulting thoughts were not cheering.

What I had to secure was that the complication should not arise before I had had time to make my effort on Normia's behalf. After that, the deluge.

In that mood I went off to bed and slept as I had not slept the whole week.

CHAPTER IX.

"UNTIL I AM YOUR WIFE."

THE following morning found me much clearer in mind and stronger in body. I had now a definite purpose in view, and had decided finally on my own course so far as my future was concerned.

It was a bright, bracing morning, brilliant with sunshine. Just such a time as makes life seem best worth living; and hitherto I had always been one to rejoice in the sheer glory of the gift of life.

But between my old and my present self there was now a deep, impassable gulf. Life to be enjoyed must be honourable; and for Gerard Provost, the spy, honour was impossible. Such a life I could not, and would not endure. Death would be infinitely preferable.

There was still one good thing I could accomplish by living—I could save the woman I loved from those who were seeking her ruin. I would live for that, and for that only. And as soon as that was accomplished, I would put an end to my life.

I rose with that resolve fixed unalterably in my mind. Thus at a stroke the whole perspective of life was changed.

I was as a man who was under sentence of death. For the while I was reprieved; but

the reprieve lasted only until I succeeded in my one object. The term of my life was fixed, however, and only the date of death remained to be settled.

Strangely enough, the fact did not in the least depress me. I was never one to rail against Fate; and the alternative—to live the life of a scoundrel—was so abhorrent, so infinitely vile a thing in my eyes, that death became the gate of release. Every hour I lived as Provost would be an hour of shame.

I schooled myself sedulously to take this view—to look on death as honourable, and on life as the reverse. It permeated every thought, and must be at the back of every action.

I was as a man apart from my fellow-creatures. The ordinary purposes, motives, and inspiration of average men were no longer of the least account to me. And what they would regard as dangers would no longer touch me in the slightest.

I did not under-estimate the perils of my hazardous position. But the man under sentence of death and prepared to welcome it at whatever hour it might come and whatever form it might take, has but little to ruffle his nerves. My only fear now was lest death should come before I had accomplished my purpose.

In this respect, the action of the girl Catarina became all-important, and I found a letter from her that morning. It was temperately worded, but under the surface it was easy to read a strong will. She reproached me for not having been to her since my return; asked why I had refused to see her when she had been

to my rooms; told me that she had left the Black House, and was living with her mother, and wound up with a demand to know when I intended to keep the pledge I had so often given her.

She gave no address, so I presumed that Provost had known where the mother lived. It was a profoundly unpleasant episode altogether. The other embarrassments I had inherited from Provost were quite troublesome enough without this love entanglement; and as it was my one object to avoid meeting her, I destroyed the letter, and told the woman of the house to deny me to her should she make another attempt to see me. If she persisted in this, I could gain further time by a change of lodgings.

In the meantime I had other affairs to consider. In the first place, there was the consideration of how I was to play the part for which I had been cast so unwillingly. I had told Vosbach overnight that the deed I was supposed to have committed had changed me; and my illness would lend colour to that. A man whose nerves are believed to have broken down could readily get others to believe him a little insane. I had seen the thought in Vosbach's eyes more than once during my assumption of swagger, and I resolved to act with enough eccentricity to promote such a belief in others.

I had a chance that morning of trying the effect of such a course. I was preparing to start for the Black House with the object of ascertaining how to get word with Normia, when

the woman of the house told me that Dr. Arnheim wished to see me. I had him up at once.

My attitude towards him, as towards so much else, had changed as the result of my new resolve. It had become impersonal. He was but one of the many tools I must use in the prosecution of my purpose. So I offered him my hand.

He was surprised, having evidently been in doubt as to the reception he would get.

"You are better, then?" he said.

"I am almost myself. My nerves broke down."

"You should have let me see you."

"I should probably have killed you. I was on the verge of insanity, and had the homicidal instinct strongly. This thing was scarcely ever out of my hand"; and I took my revolver from my pocket, and glinted at him out of the corner of my eye.

He started uneasily.

"You'd better be careful with that," he said hastily.

I smiled.

"Don't be scared. I know how to use it. Turn a trifle to one side, and I'll shave off the ends of your waxed moustache to a nicety"; and I levelled it as if in readiness. The action suggested insanity to him.

"I'd rather take your skill on trust," he exclaimed with a nervous laugh, as he shrank back and put up his hand.

"Ah! you have no right to have nerves," I said contemptuously, as I tossed the weapon

down on the table. "And now, what do you want with me?"

"Baroness Dolgoroff wished me to see you. She is very anxious about you. After this assass——" He pulled up short as I turned sharply on him. "After this visit of yours to Belgrade you stand pretty high in her favour."

"I should think I do," I replied boastfully. "And not in hers only. You have reason enough to be glad of that. But for her, you and I would have been playing with these things in earnest." I picked up the revolver again with a meaning smile. "I'll show you what sort of a chance you'd have had. See that photograph? I'll amputate that left hand." Without appearing to take careful aim, I fired at a photograph on the other side of the room, and then showed him that I had put the bullet exactly where I had said.

He was profoundly uncomfortable.

"A splendid shot," he muttered, uneasily. "But there is no reason why we should quarrel, Provost. It was I who covered up the tracks of that business a week ago."

"Tell me all about it," I exclaimed with a laugh.

He did so at considerable length, and I was careful to learn the names of all who were concerned in it. His manner of telling it and the references to his own risk suggested that he was very anxious to keep my goodwill.

I tossed him a word of praise, somewhat contemptuously.

"You've done that infernal bit of villainy cleverly enough, doctor; but if the truth ever

comes out, you'll have to answer for your share in it."

The words angered him.

"If it comes to villainy——" But my fingers closed round the revolver, and he stopped abruptly.

"Dr. Arnheim, we'd better understand one another. I don't allow any man to refer to any supposed acts of mine as villainy."

"You used the word yourself."

"I applied it to you. That makes all the difference. And if you choose to regard it as an insult, well——" And I shrugged my shoulders, having put all the contempt I could express into the words and manner. I acted the bully intentionally. I wished to make him afraid of me. He would talk to the rest.

As he believed that single-handed I had committed a cold-blooded murder, he regarded me as dangerous. His eyes dropped before mine, and he let the thing pass in silence. After a pause he said:

"The Baroness wishes to see you," and he rose.

"Then we'll go there together at once."

"I have an engagement. I am sorry."

"It will have to wait, doctor. I wish you to accompany me. And as I stand so high in the Baroness's favour, for the future you will please do as I wish."

"You are very strange, Provost," he exclaimed, flushing.

"Some people might call it mad; but you can call it what you like, and think it what you like. But you and others will find it easiest

to do what I say without kicking. I have a method of my own for kickers." And with that we started.

I had another purpose, beside a desire to swagger, in making him accompany me. I was so ignorant of the ways of the Black House that I should not know where to go or what to do when I reached it. I needed him as a guide, therefore.

When we reached the house I observed that a very strict watch was kept on all who entered. The doctor was known, of course; but my name was asked, the business which brought me, and the person whom I wished to see. All these details were, as I discovered afterwards, entered in a carefully kept register. Nor was anyone allowed to pass until he had been made free of the house by the order of Stephanie or Lepova.

I chose to take umbrage at this, and used it to make a little demonstration. I singled out the man who was in charge of the hall arrangements and jacketed him for some faults I affected to find. I followed this up by publicly giving Arnheim such directions as would let those around understand that my authority was superior to his.

"You lose no time in asserting your authority," he said, nettled by the act.

"It is my way," I rapped back, brusquely. "Those who don't like it can tell me."

"A way that will make plenty of enemies, too," he retorted.

"I came here to see the Baroness, not to discuss my conduct;" and I fell back a step

that he might lead the way, for I did not know where to go, of course.

"Most of us wait here and send up to ask if she can receive us," he said, drily, stepping into a side room; "but perhaps you can dispense with that formality."

"That is more to my liking," I replied. I instantly resolved to take his jibe as earnest, and putting my finger on the bell, held on until a servant came hurrying in. "Take me to the Baroness's rooms and announce me—M. Provost."

The servant was not more surprised than Arnheim, and stared at me as though I were a madman.

"You have an appointment, monsieur?"

"You will soon have none here if you question me," I cried sternly, and with a very angry frown. "Dr. Arnheim, I shall need you no more. Good-day. Now, you, lead the way at once."

My manner frightened the fellow's hesitation out of him, and he led me up the stairway to the room where I had seen Stephanie when at the house before. Another servant was in the ante-room, and was for stopping me, although he admitted that his mistress was disengaged.

I took a short cut to my purpose therefore. I shouldered both men out of my way, opened the door and was walking in unannounced when one of them ran up behind me and called out my name.

He held the door open long enough to see that my welcome was very cordial, and that Stephanie came toward me with both hands

outstretched. I used the occasion to impress the men.

"Don't forget yourself again," I said sternly, and stared at them until they shut the door.

By this means I managed also to evade Stephanie's outstretched hands. She let them fall slowly, with a suggestion of passing embarrassment, and asked: "Is it really you, Guy?"

"No, Baroness. It is M. Gerard Provost, a very different person from anyone you have ever associated with my presence."

She drew back a step, looked at me shrewdly, and her embarrassment passed in a laugh. "I see I must be careful with you," she replied with mock seriousness. "You are theatrical, even in your entrance. Do you know that you are the only man of all about here who would have dared to force a way to me thus?"

"The word has ceased to have much meaning for me," I replied with a shrug.

"A swashbuckling mood that, surely; and not in the least natural to you."

"Natural enough to M. Provost, believe me."

She laughed and shook her head. "Oh, no, indeed. To tell the truth he was rather a coward. But never mind the mood. I am so relieved to see you that the mood doesn't matter. Only yesterday I was told at your house——"

"M. Provost's house, remember, please," I interjected.

"That you were still desperately ill. And you are really recovered? Oh, I cannot tell my delight."

"You may modify your delight when you learn what my recovery may mean to you."

"Oh, no. My delight on that account is not to be restrained. It is spontaneous, right from my heart. You have not been out of my thoughts once the whole week. The suspense has nearly killed me." She contrived to convey, more by her manner than in her words, that she refused to take seriously the attitude I assumed.

"Then perhaps you will tell me what steps you have taken in your zeal to clear the name I used to bear from the charge of murder?"

"How could I do anything without you!" she cried, as if reproaching my unreasonableness. "But every breath of suspicion has been removed from you publicly."

"Arnheim told me. But do you propose to unearth the truth, and if so, how?"

She did not reply immediately, but moved back to the table and stood fingering some papers thoughtfully. When she looked up again, her eyes showed that she had taken some fresh purpose. Then she smiled. "Why do you assume this stern, almost truculent, manner with me? Of course it is only assumption. You see I know you and am not in the least alarmed."

"You have forced the part on me, I choose the way I shall play it. That's all."

"And began by forcing your way in here, destroying my authority with my servants and trampling on whatever orders were given to them?"

"Matters are too serious for me to care a straw for the etiquette with which you surround yourself. I go my own way."

"A very bold and important M. Provost,"

she laughed. "And when you entered I offered you my hand and you refused it, under cover of rating the servant."

"I do not choose to take the hand of an enemy."

"Theatrical again," she exclaimed, arching her brows; and then repeated my words with the exaggerated air of the heavy stage villain: "The hand of an enemy."

"You have the means of clearing my name. If you will not do it, shall I regard you as a friend?"

She laughed again. "That is surely Guy Pershore for a moment." I tossed up my hands as if it were immaterial. "And how should I answer you, then? Should I throw myself into a pose and implore you not to doubt me, and give off a string of impassioned vows of friendship? Or should I be common-sense and common-place perhaps, and just tell you not to be so ridiculously dramatic?"

She spoke with an indulgent air, as if wishful to humour me; but all the time I could see that she was carefully considering how to say what she had evidently resolved should be said.

"It will be quite enough if you will simply answer my question and say plainly whether you intend to clear my name."

"You are not very difficult to read, Guy," she said next, irrelevantly. "You did not come here to ask me that question. You are not the man to go running to any woman for help in what you yourself can do. Tell me first why have you come?"

"To see Normia."

Her eyes snapped with sudden anger.

"There is no Normia to you. To Gerard Provost she is the Princess, the affianced wife of Prince Lepova."

"To see the Princess Normia, then."

"She knows you only as Gerard Provost, who once masqueraded as Guy Pershore—and she must never know the truth. There is only one person in the world who can be trusted with your secret. Your pledge to me prevents your telling it to her. You understand that?"

"I shall not break my pledge. I can see her without doing that."

"You shall see her—but only in my presence," she declared after a pause.

"I see you trust me," I sneered.

"You need not try to wound me with sneers. I am the only person in the world who can be trusted with your secret—until the truth is discovered; and yet you will not even consider me a friend. Not even a friend! And I have given you my whole heart; and am the only one who can help you to clear your name! Do you think I do not find that hard?"

She was now intensely earnest, and spoke with much feeling.

"Do you mean to do it?"

"Yes. On my honour, yes, if I have to betray every follower of the cause—ay, even the very cause itself, and if it costs me all I care for in life. And I can do it, Guy; I know I can." She paused a second, and then, with the colour mantling her cheeks and her eyes shining, she added: "But I will not stir so much as a finger until I am—your wife."

CHAPTER X.

GERARD PROVOST, THE SWASHBUCKLER.

I THINK that Stephanie looked for a strong outburst of feeling from me in response to her startlingly frank declaration; but I merely smiled and asked:

"Is it not you who are theatrical now?"

"No—unless it is theatrical to state the truth bluntly."

"An unusual truth, at any rate."

"I have not forgotten what passed in the old days at Belgrade," she said significantly.

"It will profit neither of us to remember that."

"Ah! but I cannot forget."

I shrugged my shoulders, and the gesture angered her.

"Why should I?" she cried. "You made me love you then, and must be true to what you said. I was tied then. I am free now, and I claim your promises."

"Be at least just to the man you have killed," I replied firmly. "We met, talked, danced, and laughed together; we flirted, if you will; but in neither act nor word did I ever forget you were a married woman. If you will tell me of one, I will take up this challenge and make you my wife."

"You made me love you, and I will not give you up," she insisted, and her eyes glowed

as she bent them upon me. She was the absolute mistress of a hundred moods, and her present one was passion, intensely real or excellently simulated.

"Can we not discuss this with a little less feeling?" I asked.

She crossed to me with a low laugh, and laid her hand on my shoulder.

"Am I so hateful to you, Guy?"

"I did not come prepared to propose marriage, Baroness, and that's the truth. Nor do I think it would be anything of a success," I answered lightly.

The tone jarred, and she frowned.

"Did you come with a realisation of how absolutely you are in my power, and how impossible it is for you to clear yourself without my help?"

"You can give your help as a friend."

"And live to see another woman in your arms! It is not thus we women of the East love. Fate has given you to me, Guy."

I met her earnestness with a laugh.

"In my present plight I'm only a low grade of lottery prize. You've no great reason to thank Fate. Nor can I pretend to offer you any—any such feeling as you might desire. For the life of me, I can't see what you expect to gain."

"Can't you? Ah, Guy!" and she smiled, looking, I am bound to confess, very happy and very radiant, supremely handsome and, in my eyes, supremely devilish. But then I detested her for the use she was making of her power over me.

"Never mind the sentiment," I said bluntly. "You say you can and will clear my name if I will marry you. But if I decline?"

"You cannot. I alone know your secret. If you broke with me you would have to answer to the rest. No power on earth could then save your life."

"You mean you would tell them?"

For a second she flinched from this direct question; then met it firmly.

"Yes, I mean that. As there is nothing I will shrink from to clear your name when I share it, so there is nothing I would not do to revenge myself."

"Forcible wooing, anyway," I said, drily. "And these others—your friends, or followers, or whatever you call them—what will they say to your betrothal to a low-down, rascally scamp and spy such as Gerard Provost?"

"Do you think I care—I, who know the truth? Besides, for the present they will not be told. The needs of the cause demand secrecy for a while."

"Explain, please."

"There is a ball here to-night; come to it, and you will see for yourself. A man of great influence is to be present, and he must not yet be estranged."

I coughed suggestively.

"I understand. You hold him by the ties of attraction, eh? You are a very beautiful woman, Stephanie, and he won't have much chance. Poor devil! Who is he?"

"Baron von Epstein," she replied, with a

smile. I believe she liked my equivocal reference to her beauty.

"A big fish to catch in the conspiracy net," I said. I knew of him well enough. "Then our little compact is to be a secret from everybody, eh?"

"With one exception—Normia."

"And why Normia?"

She threw her head back and laughed.

"Because I wish it. Call it my personal vanity if you will. I shall be very proud of you, Guy."

"Exactly. And the real reason."

She hesitated, and then nodded.

"Yes. You may know it. It is policy. She believed in you once, in your capacity to do things. That was in Guy Pershore. She would not believe that *he* could ever be forced to marry me, and this will destroy any lingering doubt. If she believed in you, she might try to get your help to avoid this marriage with the Prince; and I know you well enough to believe that that might be dangerous."

I was careful not to let my face indicate my opinion of this, for she eyed me very keenly. I gave a shrug and a short laugh, and replied in the same half-flippant manner.

"If she doesn't wish to marry the man why doesn't she just bid him good-day?"

"Why don't you bid me good-day?" The words were not out of her mouth before she regretted them, and sought to cover the mistake. "The reason is obvious. She understands the responsibilities of her high position and accepts them."

"And that's why you fear she would seek my help to get out of them," I returned, drily. "You made a little slip there, Stephanie. But never mind. By the way, though, hadn't you better get the habit of calling me something else than Guy?" I asked, to get away from the subject. "I'm not very particular; but, seeing that I murdered the man, it's scarcely nice taste to take his name, is it?" I rose as I spoke, suppressed a yawn, and laughed lightly.

"Do you still care for Normia?" She flashed the question at me suddenly.

I answered very leisurely.

"I do trust that in addition to the other circumstances of our exceedingly unusual betrothal, you are not going to add the uncomfortable complication of jealousy. If you feel that you can't trust me, it will save an infinity of trouble just to ring for your head assassin and let him give me the happy despatch on this red rug. It wouldn't even spoil the colour and I promise not to squeal."

Her face darkened, and she grew almost passionately earnest.

"Are you merely acting with me?"

"Of course I am. Do be reasonable. Haven't you told me off for this spy's part, and now tacked on this betrothal business? As I'm one of the principals in the comedy—or tragedy, whichever it is—surely I may give my own impression of the part. Much more my line of work to play it as a comedy part, I assure you."

"You had better beware," she cried, with a quick gesture of anger.

I smiled.

"That's how the heavy villainess talks. I'm not going to 'beware,' or anything of the sort. As for Normia, if she means to marry Prince Lepova, I am not going to murder him in order to stop her. You are too over-coloured in your views. And now, have you any orders? Any murders or spying on the kitchen slate? Do I call every day for orders?"

"Are you seeking to fool me with your jibes, or merely to anger me?"

"A little of both, I think. If we don't quarrel, we shall only bore one another prodigiously. By the way, what should I call you—Baroness or Stephanie, or what? And am I to kiss you? And if so, on the cheek, or the lips, or the fingers? You're running this, you know."

Her eyes sparkled dangerously. "I will make you view this seriously and turn those jeers to earnest."

"I shall watch the process with deep interest, I assure you. And now, *au revoir*, Stephanie." I emphasised her name with exaggeration and laughed. "I'd stay longer, but Gerard Provost has no dress clothes, and I must go and buy some."

She let me get nearly to the door and then called me.

"Guy!"

"I really don't think 'Guy' is safe," I said, turning back slowly. "Suppose you call

me Popsy or Spy, or Fido or Murderer, or any little pet name of the sort ?"

"Oh, don't!" she cried, almost fiercely, stamping her foot.

"You're a very unreasonable woman, Stephanie," I said as I went to the door again.

"Come back, Guy."

"No, I shan't come back to be 'don'ted' in that tone. Till to-night;" and with that I walked out of the room.

I was by no means dissatisfied with the result of the interview. I had got at some of her plans, while keeping my own to myself. As for the betrothal I could just laugh at it. It would come to nothing, and the flippant bantering manner I had adopted would blunt the point of any attempt at serious lovemaking on her part.

It was not impossible that I might even laugh her out of any imaginary infatuation. Love has no enemy so keen and deadly as ridicule, and it should be my fault if the farcical side of this thing were not always on the surface.

In the meantime I had scored one important point. I should see Normia that night and have a chance of delivering to her the letter I had found in Provost's wallet; and perhaps find a chance of speaking on other matters to her.

I looked forward with the keenest anticipation to the meeting with her. I was prepared of course, to find her very antagonistic to me. Stephanie had calculated rightly enough the probable effect of the betrothal upon Normia; and I was ready to gnash my teeth at the

cunning with which the barriers between us were being piled up.

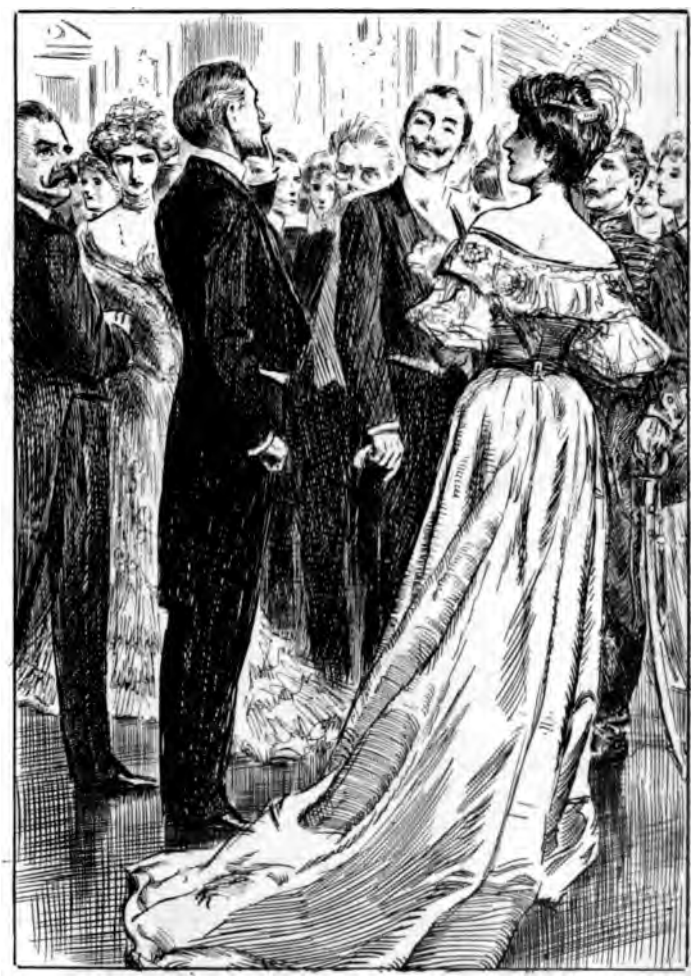
Nor was it likely that at the ball I should have much chance of talking privately with Normia. Stephanie's eyes would be on us the whole time, and no doubt she would put the Prince on his guard also. Still I was not in a mood to be easily checked, and as I entered the house for the ball, I was resolved to force matters with a strong hand, if only I should find Normia herself ready to listen.

Intentionally I maintained the same air of rather insolent swagger. I acted as though the deed with which I was credited had turned my head. I had dressed myself with scrupulous care, and when I had swaggered up the broad staircase I waited at the door of the room where Stephanie was receiving until there was a comparative lull in the hubbub, when I made the man bawl out my name at the top of his lung power.

Many heads were turned in my direction as I went up to Stephanie.

Baron von Epstein—a red-headed, fiery little person, with bold, insolent eyes—was in close attendance upon her, and as I bent over her hand, which I held a good deal longer than etiquette required, I murmured two or three phrases to the accompaniment of ardent looks, which I knew would stir his jealousy.

It was a good beginning. After a moment or two, during which I had the satisfaction of seeing that she was exceedingly uncomfortable, he pushed forward to claim her attention. I behaved with abominable rudeness. I gave



"'SO HER HIGHNESS, THE PRINCESS, DOES NOT FRIVOL WITH US TO-NIGHT.'"

(*Page 113.*)

him a very stony, impertinent stare, and asked, in a tone loud enough for some of those about us to hear:

"Who is this—person?"

"Baron von Epstein, let me present M. Provost, one of the staunchest adherents of our cause," said Stephanie quickly, colouring with vexation.

He stared at me; I murmured: "Delighted;" and I immediately turned my back on him and went on talking to her.

But she cut me short. "You must excuse me, now, monsieur. The Baron was telling me something I would not miss for the world;" and then I found myself at liberty to make the round of the rooms in search of Normia.

How many of those present knew me I could not even guess, of course, nor did it trouble me much. I had become absolutely indifferent to the risks of being recognised; and I sauntered from one room to the other with a lordly air as if the whole place belonged to me.

But to my dismay Normia was not present; and when presently I saw Prince Lepova I resolved to ask him if she were coming. He was the centre of a little group, and in conformity with my conception of my great personal importance, I pushed my way through the people, and said familiarly: "Good evening, Prince."

"Ah, M. Provost, good evening," he replied somewhat distantly. He was apparently none too well pleased at my greeting.

"So her highness, the Princess, does not frivol with us to-night?"

"On the contrary, monsieur, she has been present and will return," he replied rather curtly.

"I am glad," I said indulgently, as though graciously bestowing my approval upon the arrangement. "I shall be happy to meet her again."

"Indeed," he rapped back, thinking to snub me.

But I stared at him steadily, and replied, in a tone of studied insolence:

"Yes, indeed, M. le Prince. May I ask if you have any objection?"

My impertinence brought two little spots of colour to his cheeks and he bit his lip. But he smothered his anger. "No, monsieur, none, of course."

"Then it is a pity you should so address me as to imply to those about us that you had," I retorted; and without waiting for his answer I turned on my heel.

Dr. Arnheim was standing with two or three other men close by and heard this. I saw them glance at one another with shrugs and smiles; and the doctor came up and bade me good evening.

I glanced down at him superciliously and waved him away. "I have no commands for you to-night, doctor. You can stay with your friends;" and I sauntered on as he rejoined the men, looking bitterly mortified and not a little discomfited by the sally of laughter with which they greeted him.

It was, however, good policy for me to keep everyone at a distance, and as to the means by

which I could best accomplish that result, I was indifferent. That they should look upon me as a swashbuckling braggart was nothing to me.

Presently Stephanie, flushed and angry, came up to me. "Are you mad that you seek to make enemies on all sides?" she exclaimed.

"I am not very particular. What is the matter?"

"First you insulted Baron von Epstein, and then the Prince. That is very much the matter indeed."

I smiled. "Of course I'm jealous of the Baron. What else? As for the Prince, he tried to snub me. Would you have Gerard Provost, the man you are honouring with your hand, take a snub from a third-rate Prince? My dear Stephanie!"

"You will ruin everything," she cried.

"No more than returning the compliment paid to Guy Pershore. I am naturally elated over my betrothal, and really must get all the enjoyment I can out of it."

And at that she flung away from me with an exclamation of anger.

I resumed my tour of the rooms and was standing close to one of the conservatories when Normia came out of it on the arm of a man. My pulses leapt at the sight of her; but I had myself well in hand, and when she saw me I bowed.

I feared that she would avoid me, but to my surprise she returned the bow, and after one or two nervous glances about her, she said

something to the man, took her hand from his arm, and came toward me.

It became very difficult for me to retain my composure.

"I—I wish to speak to you, M. Provost," she said. She trembled and stumbled over the name.

"You honour me, Princess," I replied, loud enough for those about us to hear. "Will you walk with me down the room?"

"I—I mean privately."

"Believe me, it will be safer not to leave this crowded room."

Her glance of suspicion told me that she half thought I wished to avoid any private conversation. But I took no notice, and as we turned down the room I began to talk of the heat and the crush and so on. She replied in monosyllables, and was so obviously uneasy that I gave her a word of caution.

"Many eyes are on us. I beg you play your part as though this were merely a casual conversation. I also have much to say to you."

"Did you bring nothing for me from Belgrade, monsieur?" she asked after a few moments.

I saw Stephanie and the Prince watching us from a distance. I laughed, as if at some jest of hers and waved my hand about the room, as I replied: "I have a paper for you. If you will drop your handkerchief I will give it you."

A moment later she dropped the handkerchief, and with the paper folded in my hand I stooped to pick it up.

"Permit me," said a voice. It was Lepova. He had come up with Stephanie on his arm, and reached out to recover the handkerchief.

"You will scarcely rob me of the chance to render the Princess this trifling service," I said quickly, as I picked it up. Then, holding his eyes on mine that he might not see what I was about, I crushed the paper into the handkerchief and returned it with a bow to Normia.

As I stood up I met Stephanie's eyes.

Normia was very confused, and obviously afraid of them both. She changed colour, bowed to me, and with a murmured "Thank you, monsieur," went off on the Prince's arm, just as Baron von Epstein came up to Stephanie, much to my relief.

Had either of them seen anything?

CHAPTER XI.

THE DREGS OF THE CUP OF DEGRADATION.

As Prince Lepova led Normia away on his arm I glanced after him with a very unamiable frown. So far as she was concerned, Guy Pershore might in reality have been as dead as common report stated.

She could never be anything to me, nor I to her. I knew that. I had carefully schooled myself to accept that as a hard, unalterable fact.

But love is love, and hot blood hot blood, and will not be denied. And to see her marched off in this fashion with his air of masterful ownership galled me no less than it would have done had I been once more myself instead of the pitiful carrier pigeon and go-between of these conspiracy-mongers.

The mask must have fallen from my face for the while, for suddenly, with a sneering chuckle, a low, deep voice said in my ear:

"A handsome couple, M. Gerard Provost, eh?"

I turned to find a tall, angular man at my elbow staring at me, his narrow-set, grey-green eyes screwed up, and his long, thin, ugly face wrinkled into a cunning grin.

I returned his stare, and had the greatest difficulty in repressing a start of surprise as I

recognised him as a Captain Nescher, of the Servian army—a man whom I knew to be heart and soul a supporter of his government.

What could such a man be doing here in the centre of this Black House conspiracy? A hundred suggestions flashed through my thoughts in the moment of pause before I replied.

"A cat may look at a king," I said, coolly.

"Or a rat at a Princess."

"Or an honest man at a rascal."

"One of us may be doing that at this moment," he retorted, pointedly.

"You're none so pretty a sight that I wish to detain you," I said, with a shrug.

Instead of taking offence he laughed, and let out an oath with a sort of tolerant contempt of me.

"They tell me you've picked up some courage during your absence—as well as some other things."

That he had not resented my insult was plain proof that there was something behind his manner, and I resolved to investigate what his last words meant.

"Time to talk about that when the need arises."

"Come out on to the balcony here. I have something to say to you."

We went out, and he led me to an alcove at the far end which was almost concealed by palms and shrubs. A very cosy corner indeed.

"We can talk here without being overheard, but keep your voice low. So you've been out of your mind, they tell me Vosbach says so,

and Arnheim believes it. Very convenient, at times."

"Have you brought me out here to give me your views on lunacy?"

"No, I haven't—except on your lunacy. I've brought you out to tell you I don't believe in your madness. Others may, but I don't. See?"

"I don't see that I need care what you think. Others may, but I don't. See?" And I mimicked his manner and his phrase.

"In my opinion it may be a very convenient excuse for forgetting things. That's all. No more. Places and times of unwelcome meetings, possibly. Possibly, also, the whereabouts of sums of money."

This was suggestive enough. Was it possible that he was one of the men of whom Vosbach had spoken? One of the men in the plot to carry off Normia? If so, the affair was vastly more significant than I had believed.

"Personally, I prefer plain speaking," I said.

"Patience, M. Provost, patience. You shall have that from me, I promise you. Am I right that you *forgot* the meeting with us?"

"What meeting?"

"Exactly," he laughed. "I suppose you are not yet sane enough to remember that? But make an effort—just a little effort." His manner was a blend of banter and threat, and the talk interested me deeply.

"I am afraid my wits are in too great a whirl," I answered lightly.

"I suppose you haven't forgotten that you

went to Belgrade?" he asked next. He was beginning to lose his temper.

"Oh, no. That's all clear enough."

"And that you saw Major Raskoff?"

"Well?" I was obliged to him for telling me what I wished to know.

"And that he spoke to you about the Princess?"

"A good deal was said about the Princess," I agreed.

"And also about the sum to be paid when she was safely in the hands of his friends here?"

"Ye—es," I assented, as if recalling the fact with difficulty.

"And that he gave you a considerable sum to bring to us?"

"Ah! that's just where I begin to get very hazy."

He sat up suddenly with an oath.

"And that's just where I mean you to be perfectly clear," he cried sternly.

I assumed a good-natured air.

"I'll try. To oblige you. You're such a nice fellow, and have such winning ways, that——"

"Enough of that," he broke in angrily. "I'm not Vosbach, to be fooled by you; nor Arnheim, to be frightened by your monkey tricks with a revolver. You're dealing with Jacob Grundelhof, and I don't suppose you've forgotten the lesson I gave you once before."

"Let's see—what was that?" I asked, putting my hand to my head.

This enraged him. He seized my hand,

tore it away from my face, and forced me round towards him.

"If you seek to fool me I'll do worse next time than thrash you."

I affected to be cowed.

"There's no need for force, Grundelhof. What is it you want?"

"That's much better," he said, laughing with great self-satisfaction. "There was a meeting last Thursday night in my rooms to hear your report and receive the money you brought back with you. We meet again to-morrow night. Don't forget it, and don't forget to bring that money. If you come without it, Provost, something ugly will follow; and if you don't come at all—well, you'll regret your failure of memory as long, or as short, as your life lasts. Is that plain speaking enough for you?"

"What time?" I stammered.

"Nine o'clock—the usual time; and the usual address—368, Kammerstrasse. You shan't have any excuse for forgetting that either, for I've told it you *after* your madness." And he chuckled sneeringly as he rose.

"I'm not likely to forget after this," I muttered, with a shudder. He glanced down at me with another chuckle, and as he was moving off, another man came out and lit a cigarette. "Is that you, Baumstein?" he asked.

"Hullo! Cogitating a poem, Grundelhof?" was the reply.

"No. Something more practical. Been curing a man of madness—Gerard Provost.

Teaching him how to get back that memory of his."

"Oh! that sort of madness," laughed Baumstein. "Suppose because the Dragoness has taken him up he thinks he can do as he likes, eh?"

"I've told him that if he doesn't remember where that money is and bring it to us to-morrow night, there'll be trouble."

"I think we can find a way between us to lead him back into the paths of sanity and virtue," sneered the other.

"Depends on the value he puts on his skin," replied Grundelhof, as they moved away together, chuckling, leaving me with the knowledge that they regarded me as both a liar and a thief. If I attended the meeting I should probably be killed; while if I stayed away the probability became a virtual certainty.

A comfortable outlook. It was a good thing that I had made up my mind to face death. But it was not the men's threats that disturbed me so much as the cheap contempt in which they held me. Nothing was too mean and despicable to be set down to my debit. I had the feel of the fellow's grip on my arm still; he had boasted of the thrashing he had given me, and had expected me to cringe at the mention of it. I was a sort of doormat for others to wipe their feet upon.

I don't know whether men who are the "real thing" in blackguardism feel anything like the hot shame which I felt that night. But if they do, then, poor devils, they must carry their own rack about with them and

stretch themselves on it in every moment of leisure.

I could, and would, do something to change the character these men so lightly gave me; and this thought eased the sense of degradation. But if I had been in truth the miserable wretch they believed, I would have jumped there and then from the balcony and broken my neck on the flags below.

These personal feelings outweighed for the time even the significance of the discovery I had made that behind this plot against Normia was the Servian government. This Captain Nescher was without doubt acting for the government, and Normia was in vastly greater peril from it than I had thought.

But for the moment I was so mad with rage that I could think of nothing else. I was sick to death of the part of Gerard Provost, and as my temper cooled I grew profoundly miserable and dejected.

The lights of the great city spread out in front of me served only to remind me in bitter mockery that in the world they typified I had lost everything. Position, hopes, desires, ambition, love—all gone; and the very memory of my name would have been tainted by the foulest of crimes but for an elaborately acted lie and fraud.

Here in this false little world of which I was now a lying part, those who believed they knew me could think of nothing too despicable to believe and say of me. And as I sat there, brooding over my troubles in this moody fashion, flushing at one moment in shame and

the next in rage, it did not seem possible that there was any lower depth of degradation or bitterness left for me to sound.

Yet there was worse still to come.

One minute crumb of comfort I had; the merest starvation diet, it was true; yet something. I had succeeded in getting that paper to Normia, and I had hoped she would read in the act a desire to help her.

It was evidently a matter of much moment to her. She had sent some message to Belgrade by Provost to which this paper and the money were the reply. It was an easy guess that she had sent an appeal for help; for I held to my belief that she was only taking part in this scheme because of the hold which Stephanie had over her—the "Dragoness," as Baumstein had rather happily called her.

Why she had chosen Provost, never having seen him, was something of a puzzle; but I looked for the solution in the fact that Catarina had been at the Black House and had probably persuaded her that he could be trusted. My delivery of the paper might be accepted as a proof that that trust had not been misplaced, and in that case I might be able to persuade her to trust me still further.

For me to be of any assistance in the dangers that threatened her, it was essential that she should trust and come to rely on me. But it would have to be in the hated character of Provost.

Tell her the truth about myself, I could not. In the first place I was bound by my pledged word to Stephanie, and that must have

held me silent without any other considerations. But there was another and a far stronger consideration. If she cared for me it would be the rankest cowardice to tell her the truth, so long as I was unable to clear myself from the charge of murder and while I had resolved to end my life. The result would but be that in a measure she would have to bear a part of the shame and misery which had forced me to that resolve.

No. If I was to win her trust it would have to be as the scamp Provost, and I must succeed in showing her in my acts that my desire to help her was sincere. My secret must be kept at any cost.

I was deeply absorbed by these thoughts when I became aware that some other people had come out on to the balcony and were standing close to a huge azalea which shielded my seat from observation.

I had no wish to play the eavesdropper, and was about to strike a match to light a cigar and thus make my presence known, when I recognised Stephanie's voice.

"I will know, Normia; I swear I will. And if you won't tell me I can force it from him. I saw the whole thing, and I know there was something in the handkerchief. I watched you afterwards, and saw you put it away."

Rightly or wrongly—I leave that for others to determine—I did not strike the match, and so did not reveal my presence.

"You are mad to think of such a thing, Stephanie. It is only your insane jealousy, and

you shame me. Jealousy! And with such a man as Gerard Provost!"

"That was not always your cry."

"I did not know him then. I declare, on my honour, that nothing would ever make me stoop to such a baseness. Have you ever known me lie?"

"Then what was in the handkerchief?"

"I have told you I will not even answer a question so dishonouring to me."

"I will tell the Prince," said Stephanie spitefully.

"If it would but cause him to break this hateful match, I should be glad enough."

"Have a care how you anger and defy me."

"I know," replied Normia desolately, "you can threaten the lives of those who are dearer to me than life or honour even. Through them I am in your power. But even to save them I would not falsely confess to the shame of an intrigue with such a man as Gerard Provost."

I had ears for no more. The contempt and scorn of the last words cut me like a sword-thrust, and I winced and flinched at the pain.

Never before had I fully realised all that Normia was to me. I had set her before all else in the world. It was only for her that I was willing to endure the shame and vileness of my present position. I had no thought but to serve her. And yet almost at the moment when I had been indulging the hope that she might glean enough from the old relations between us to trust me, this scathing, bitter, relentless condemnation had come.

Presently the scrape of feet on the balcony

told me that others had come out. I heard Baron von Epstein's self-satisfied tones and Stephanie's replies, mingled with light laughter, and then the soft *frou-frou* of silk as they all went in.

After a time I rose. I would take my misery back to the dingy lodgings which were my home. I would—but at that moment I saw I was not alone.

Standing by the railing in front of the balcony, staring out vaguely over the lights of the great city, was a girl who, judging by her pose of dejection and the deep, deep sigh which escaped her as I approached, was well nigh as desolate and wretched as I myself.

Then I saw that it was Normia, and I stopped.

The slight start I gave was enough to rouse her, and she looked round at me. Her eyes widened when she saw who I was. Then she drew herself up and shrank away. "M. Provost!" she said with a mixture of surprise, disdain, and suspicion in her tone.

I bowed and, moved by a blundering impulse to try to shake her distrust, I replied: "That most miserable of men, Princess, who for the sake of the past would give his life to serve you."

She paused a second, and I was fool enough to hope that the sincerity of my offer had impressed her. But I was speedily undeceived.

"How dare you insult me by such a reference? Oh, if I had only known then what you were!" I lowered my head in bitterness at the taunt. "You will be good enough

never to address me again, monsieur. The services of such men as you I regard as an insult."

"For God's sake, listen to me!" I cried desperately, as I looked up. "Your own safety——"

But she would not hear me.

"Monsieur!" she protested indignantly; and with a look of disdain, as though I were less than dirt in her eyes, she turned her back on me and swept away into the house.

With a groan of despair I dropped into a seat, feeling that at last indeed I had plumbed the lowest depths of misery and degradation.

CHAPTER XII.

NORMIA.

As I left the house about an hour later—as black an hour as any man could pass—Vosbach joined me.

"I have been waiting for you, Provost. I want to speak to you particularly."

"I am in no very amiable mood," I replied.

"I can understand that. Grundelhof told me."

"Has he sent you now to find out what I think of him?"

"No. I shouldn't do that."

"Then what is it?"

"Will you come to my rooms. We can talk better there."

For an instant I hesitated, suspecting some trap, but then agreed. "Of course I will, if you wish," I said.

He guessed the reason of my hesitation. "You needn't doubt me, Provost. I shan't play you any tricks."

We walked on without speaking, and I saw him glancing at me every now and then in some perplexity.

"You're very quiet," he said.

I understood the cause of his perplexity and played up to it. "I have had a serious talk with Grundelhof," I said with a short laugh.

He set down the absence of bombast in me to cowardice of course, and it was not worth while to undeceive him at present.

As I did not know where he lived I made a mistake when we reached the house. I was passing it, when he said :

" Here we are, man. Where are you going ? You don't pretend not to know where I live."

" No. It wouldn't be much good, would it ? " and I laughed as we went in. Then I made another blunder. He closed the door and I began to mount the stairs.

" Where are you going now ? " he called, stopping at a door on the ground floor.

I mumbled some excuse about thinking I was in my own house ; and then went on to commit blunder after blunder, until, had he not been thick-headed, he must have discovered the imposture. As it was he commented on the many differences between me and Provost, and actually referred to Arnheim's suspicion on the night of the murder.

At that I looked very serious, and asked him if he wanted to know the truth.

" It's all true about my having been nearly out of my mind ; my memory has gone all to pieces. I didn't know where you lived ; I can't remember half the things I ought to know ; I —oh, don't let us speak of it—I can't bear it ; " and clapping my hands to my head I groaned and pretended to be overcome.

He seemed to have a streak of good nature in him, and then it came out that I had in some way rendered him a service, and that, being

grateful, he wished to warn me not to go to the meeting on the next night.

I affected to be so distraught that I was heedless of what occurred. I was, in fact, playing my "agony of mind" mood for all it was worth to work on his feelings and lull his suspicions. And in the midst of this he told me his reason.

To his intense surprise and consternation, I burst into a long, loud peal of laughter the moment I heard it.

Grundelhof and his companion were going to play a dirty trick on me, he said, and have the Greek girl, Catarina, at the meeting and a priest, and force me to marry her. The thought of Stephanie's amazement if I had to tell her that I could not marry her because her followers had already mated me to the amorous Greek, was too much for my gravity.

I am sure that Vosbach took my laughter for the proof of madness. His face showed it, and he was distinctly relieved when I rose and said I must go.

"You're worse than you think, Provost," he said sympathetically.

"Does Catarina know about this little plan?"

"Not yet, I think. He will see her to-morrow. If I were you, I should bolt."

"Oh, I don't know. She might make as good a wife as another;" and with another laugh I went away, leaving him in a condition of absolute bewilderment.

I had been so tried that night, and my nerves were so highly strung, that I found in-

tense relief in that laughter. It was, of course, largely hysterical, but it did me good, and I put off the consideration of the serious side of the complication until the morning; and thus succeeded in sleeping well.

One thing I was quite resolved upon. I would go to the meeting at any cost. I must get at Grundelhof's intentions in regard to Normia. And I must devise some means during the day of preventing the Greek from being present. She would inevitably recognise me; and that must be staved off as long as possible.

Time was more urgent now than ever, indeed. What I had overheard on the previous evening between Stephanie and Normia made clear the nature of the threat which held the latter in fear of Stephanie, and I knew that there was no foundation for it in fact. Get that information to Normia by some means I must; and I turned over a dozen devices in my mind.

Normia's attitude to me had greatly increased the difficulties. I could not blame her for the prejudice against me, but at the same time, while she entertained it I could not hope to get her to listen to me. I could not write to her, because I was convinced that Stephanie would be careful to read all the correspondence that entered the Black House. Nor could I gain admission to her apartments. No one was admitted without a written order from either the Prince or Stephanie.

It was exasperating to a degree to feel that I had the means of freeing her from the influences that were surely leading her to ruin, and

yet could do nothing for lack of the mere opportunity of speaking to her. I was worrying with this problem when the unexpected happened.

Normia herself entered my room.

I sprang to my feet in such intense surprise that I almost forgot my manners as I stared at her. She was very pale, very nervous, and trembled in such agitation that she could scarcely speak at first.

"This visit surprises you, M. Provost," she said hesitatingly.

I pulled myself together and placed a chair for her.

"I scarcely know what to augur from it, Princess, after—after your words last night."

She did not sit down, but remained at one end of the table while I stood at the other. She paused, evidently at a loss how to approach the object of her visit.

"Yet you must surely know why I have risked coming to you?" she said.

"If you will only permit me to say what last night——"

"It is about the paper you brought to me," she broke in.

It was to secure my silence to Stephanie, then, I concluded.

"Let me assure you that you may rely absolutely upon my silence," I said.

She started and glanced at me suspiciously.

"Why do you say that?"

"I was on the balcony when Baroness Dolgoroff told you she had seen there was something in the handkerchief."

The colour rushed to her face in a crimson

flood, her eyes flashed angrily, and her hands clenched. Then, as the colour ebbed, she replied, with a curl of the lip:

"I had forgotten. It is, of course, your business to listen."

It was my turn to wince at that, and I felt myself grow hot and cold in turn. But I made no reply. She saw how the words had stung me, but the reason, of course, she could not know.

"I did not wish to anger you, monsieur. Heaven knows I have no such desire at such a crisis." She sat down then as if overwrought.

"You have not angered me. You have said no more than others believe, and I have lost the right to contradict them, or you. And if your coming here means that you will honour me by allowing me to serve you in any way, nothing else that you can say will count with me."

"You really wish to serve me?" she asked with unmistakable earnestness.

"I ask no more than that you put me to the proof."

"You can prove it at once, monsieur. Explain the meaning of the paper you brought for me from my friends in Belgrade."

"Explain it?" I echoed, in blank amazement.

Her face hardened and her eyes filled with doubt and fear.

"Yes, monsieur. Explain it and the presence of this money;" and she laid it down.

I was dumbfounded and had no reply.

"Whom did you see in Belgrade, monsieur?"

Again I was silent, bitterly chagrined, as I felt how this silence must convict me in her eyes.

"You cannot have forgotten that, M. Provost," she said indignantly.

"I am aware that you must believe that," I answered feebly.

She rose. "And this is the proof of your desire to serve me! Heaven pardon you for this falseness. I see that I have risked this visit in vain."

"You must not go like this," I cried hastily, as she turned to the door.

"Monsieur!" she exclaimed, drawing herself to her full height and looking at me with eyes that flashed with anger.

I would have given my life to be able to tell her the truth then, but it was out of the question. But go she should not until I had told her about her own danger; so I went to the door and stood between it and her.

"You must listen to me before you go."

"You dare to detain me forcibly."

"For God's sake, can't you see there is something I cannot explain?" I replied passionately. "Just as there is something I must tell you, for your own sake."

She shrank away from the look in my eyes.

"Let me go, monsieur."

I paid no heed to her plea.

"Last night I overheard that the hold which the Baroness has over you is the fear that she will betray your mother and sister

to the Servian government. I can tell you that you have nothing on that account to fear. The government know where they are living, and so long as they and you take no hostile action against them, they are safe."

"Yes, monsieur. Thank you. Now may I go?"

I tossed up my hands with a sigh of despair. Her tone showed me that she did not believe me.

"In Heaven's name do try to understand that I am not all lies," I cried vehemently. "I know that I seem to you no more than a scoundrelly spy, and I cannot utter a word to undeceive you. But what I have told you is the truth. That I swear to you. And you are taking the actual steps, in this fatuous conspiracy, which will do the very thing you are risking everything to avoid."

"Yes, monsieur. Thank you. May I go?" she repeated, fear alike in her eyes, voice, and shrinking attitude.

I stepped from the door and threw it open.

"As you will. But Heaven help those who are dear to you if you persist in this terrible mistrust of my warning."

She was partly reassured by my opening the door, and turned when she reached the threshold.

"How do you know this, monsieur?"

"I cannot tell you that. But it is true—as true as that there is now here, in this city, a scheme on foot to seize you and hand you over to the Servian government. But no doubt you will take that warning as lightly as the

other, because it comes from Provost the spy," I said bitterly.

She returned to the table and sat down again, burying her face in her hands.

"If I could only make you believe in my good faith, Princess, I could help you."

"Why did you refuse to answer my questions about these?" touching the papers.

"My lips are sealed, or I could explain it all."

"By the woman who has bought you and your silence, and whom you are to marry?"

"I seem no doubt to you to deserve that. You must think of me as you will," I replied, with a sigh. "If you will but heed my warning, I am satisfied."

"What am I to think?" she cried, with a gesture of perplexity.

"If you will be counselled by me you will communicate either with this government or your own, and lay the whole facts before them."

She gave a start of alarm.

"Turn traitor?" she cried quickly. "*You* advise this! And against your—against the Baroness? And directly after you have played me false with these?"

I could have cursed the papers for the effect they had had upon her. I picked up the blank sheet.

"If you judge me by this, and hold everything I say to you false because I cannot explain, you will walk straight to your ruin as surely as you are speaking to me; and will drag others down with you. I swear to you I have no thought but for your good; and if you

can find a single grain of the trust you once had in me, try to believe me for the sake of that time."

But this angered her. She rose.

"How dare you, monsieur?"

"I dare, not for my sake, but for yours. Heaven knows I have nothing to gain now except to save you from the fate you are so recklessly bringing on yourself."

She fixed her eyes on me in a long, steady stare, but at the close tossed up her hands and shook her head.

"In the face of this, no—no—no."

I had been holding the paper in my hands, and now, as I glanced down at it, I noticed some faint marks. It occurred to me they had been brought out by the warmth of my hands; and as I had had plenty of experience with cyphers and secret inks, I guessed that there was secret writing on this.

It took me only a short time to test this, and I soon perceived that my guess was right.

"There is some secret writing here, Princess," I said.

"Why did you not tell me that before?"

"I have but this moment discovered it."

She was greatly excited now, and trembled nervously as she watched the words come out gradually under the means I employed.

"Turn the paper up that I may read it, monsieur," she said. I was intentionally holding it with the back toward us, so that I should not read the writing.

"It is to you—not to me. Whoever wrote

it did not mean me to read it. I do not wish to pry into your secrets."

"If you have not already done so."

I let the taunt pass, and when the writing was clear I gave her the paper. She read it, and turned on me with an angry start.

"As I thought; it is only another proof of your deceit!" she cried, her eyes flashing with rage as she handed it to me:

"We cannot understand your messenger, or why you want money. Why did you not write? We cannot send the amount you ask for, but do send all we can. Do you know that your messenger is not a Frenchman, but a renegade Englishman, named Pershore?"

I read the message in silence, and with an inward curse at the scurvy trick which Fate had played me. It was the hardest blow I had yet endured.

"What message did you give them, monsieur?" Her voice was hard as steel.

I was once again dumbfounded, and my eyes fell in confusion.

"Come, monsieur. You must know that. Explain, if you please."

"Unhappily, that is impossible," I said. "Heaven knows what it costs me to have to confess that."

"Instead of giving my message you asked for money."

"It seems so," I admitted, fatuously. I was at the end of my wits, dazed by this most unexpected turn.

"My friends—my mother—for that is her writing, monsieur—would not write what is untrue," she went on relentlessly.

"I do not even suggest that."

"Then how can I believe a word you say? Oh, it is cruel—it is dastardly! By this deceit, in not carrying my message, you have cut from me the one hope I had. Go on with your work, Monsieur Spy! Tell your employer that I sent a message by you to my friends; that I plotted to have a friend sent here; that I tried to escape from her; and that I degraded myself to-day by coming here to beg you at least to do that for which you had been paid. You deceived me before by masquerading as an honest man whom I would have trusted with my life, and of course you would deceive me now with this treacherous suggestion that I should give myself up to the government. But you have opened my eyes in time."

I took it without flinching. The facts as she knew them warranted every one of the bitter words.

"I have no answer, except to beg that if you can put this aside and give me a further test, you shall have proof of my sincerity."

"You have given me the proof, thank you," she cried bitterly. Then, as if overcome, she fell back in her chair and hid her face in her hands.

I was standing by the window and turned away to stare out into the street, while she recovered self-command. In the pause, infinitely distressing to me, a carriage drew up at the door of the house, and to my dismay Prince Lepova

alighted and handed out Stephanie. And both entered the house.

At the same moment Normia rose to go.

"One thing you can do, monsieur. I wish this visit to be kept secret."

"It is too late for secrecy, Princess. Prince Lepova and Baroness Dolgoroff are just entering the house. The test you would not make has come unsought. I am not the scoundrel you think, and I will prove it now. I beg you to appear composed, and leave it to me to explain the reason for your presence here. Take your stand just there, please."

She was intensely agitated, but did as I wished. I crossed the room and set the door slightly ajar, listening for the footsteps on the stairs.

CHAPTER XIII.

MY MARRIAGE FIXED.

NORMIA appeared to be scarcely more alarmed by the arrival of Stephanie and Prince Lepova than by my actions and sudden assumption of a swaggering manner.

"That letter must not be seen," I whispered hurriedly, as I saw it still in her hands. "Quick —quick!"

She put it away with nervous haste.

There were two or three seconds' pause, and then I heard the rustle of Stephanie's dress on the stairway.

I burst suddenly into a loud, raucous, insolent laugh, and Normia shrank away a step in consternation.

"Well, I trust now, madame, whether Princess or no Princess, that I have taught you your lesson," I cried in a truculent bullying tone. "You know now that Gerard Provost will brook no such insult as you gave me."

There was no need to give her a stage direction to make the necessary show of indignation. She thought I was in earnest, and was referring to what had passed between us. Her face flushed.

"How dare you, monsieur?" she cried.

I laughed again.

"Your anger, madame——" I began, just

as the door opened and the two entered. "Ah, Baroness Dolgoroff! M. le Prince!" and I changed my tone to one of surprise. "You are welcome, indeed. You come in time to bear out what I have just told this lady—that Gerard Provost is not the man to let anyone—even princesses—trample him in the dirt."

Prince Lepova's surprise at seeing Normia there was genuine, but Stephanie's was obviously assumed. Her face was eloquent of suspicion and jealousy.

"How dare you address the Princess in that way, monsieur?" cried Lepova.

But Stephanie turned on Normia.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked, with an unmistakable threat in her voice.

"As it is my doing, I can best explain. The Princess came here at my bidding."

"M. Provost!" burst out the Prince, furiously.

I turned, and stared at him slowly, from head to foot.

"At my bidding, I said, M. le Prince—mine, Gerard Provost;" and I tapped myself arrogantly on the chest. "At somebody's dictation—yours, perhaps, monsieur—or another's;" and I looked meaningly at Stephanie and paused: "the Princess was pleased to put an affront on me at the Black House last night. I did myself the honour, therefore, to write and inform her that if she would not come here—here, to this house, to my rooms, M. le Prince—and make me amends, I would revenge the affront by carrying such information as I possess about her and all to those who

would be careful not to affront a French gentleman giving valuable information."

"A French gentleman!" sneered Lepova. "Infamous!"

I paused and knitted my brows, like the bully I was playing.

"A French gentleman, M. le Prince, who does not use the presence of women to insult a man."

But Stephanie was not misled.

"Why did not you tell me?" she asked Normia.

"Or me, Normia?" added the Prince.

"If you will show them my letter, it will best explain that," I said coolly.

"I have not kept it, monsieur," answered Normia; and to the others: "I was frightened by the threats."

Good! Here was the beginning of an understanding. She had accepted the explanation I had vamped, and trusted me.

I laughed offensively.

"And by the Cross I'd have made them good. But my honour is satisfied; you have done what I required; and so far as I am concerned the matter is ended;" and I made Normia an elaborate bow. "I intended it as a test, and it has answered its purpose."

A quick flash from her eyes seemed to signal a reply to this equivocal sentence, and at that the situation entirely changed its character for me. The Prince believed my story, and with Stephanie I could deal afterwards. She would not venture to speak out before Lepova, and as three of us had now

secret cross purposes, the position became divertingly artificial and unreal.

Normia had recovered her spirits the moment it was patent to her that I did not intend to betray the real reason of her presence, and I hoped she would accept this as a proof, despite the black evidence against me in the matter of the Belgrade business, that I was really anxious to serve her.

After her glance at me she looked across at Stephanie, and, with a contemptuous wave of the hand in my direction and a curl of the lip, she said:

"It seems that we are all to take our orders from this new favourite of yours."

This note of open antagonism was quite new, and it delighted me as much as it surprised Stephanie.

"It is true," I declared arrogantly, "that Fortune has placed me on the centre of the see-saw."

"It may prove a perilous position, monsieur," snapped Stephanie, coldly.

But Lepova took everything very seriously.

"You did very wrong to come here, Normia. I will take you home."

"Have we this gentleman's permission?" she asked in a bitterly scornful tone.

The Prince's eyes glittered with suppressed passion.

"Enough of this," he cried.

I crossed to the door and opened it.

"Permit me," and I bowed low to Normia.

"Stay," cried Stephanie, taking a paper

from her pocket. "There is still a matter to be discussed. A charge against M. Provost."

"Another!" I said, with a mocking laugh. "Upon my word, I thought the indictment was about full enough. Poor Gerard Provost!"

"One of your adherents—your late serving maid, Normia, Catarina Machia—demands our aid as the leaders in righting this gentleman's betrayal of her."

The malice of this was as clear as the sun at noontide. She had come to consult with me about this Catarina complication, and, angered by what had just occurred, she was using the letter to blacken me further in Normia's eyes. But I managed to blunt the barb.

"Poor little Greek girl! And does *she* propose to force me to marry her, Baroness? Is that the justice she seeks?"

And, hugely to my glee, Normia followed this with a thrust on her own account. She drew herself up and with a nasty little laugh said:

"I have no wish to listen to the discussion of this gentleman's love affairs. They concern you more than me, Baroness. Your arm, Prince, if you please." And with that she swept out, leaving Stephanie pale and furious at her discomfiture.

"That comes of meddling with your future husband's old love matters, Stephanie. If you will marry a blackguard you really must have more tact," I bantered; and throwing myself into a chair I gave way to unrestrained laughter.

I could afford to laugh now, indeed. Normia and I had a secret in common and an under-

standing, and all Stephanie's malice had been unable to disturb it.

"Why did Normia come here?" asked Stephanie. She was pacing the room, her face set and angry. She flung the question at me with a searching glance.

"You heard me give the reason."

"I want the truth," she snapped, hastily.

I tossed up my hands in affected protest.

"Stephanie! Stephanie! Such rudeness! And before marriage, too! Really! Really!"

I looked for a further outburst, but instead, she grew cool and dangerous. She sat down to the table and drew some writing materials in front of her.

"You do not understand me yet, Guy. You think you can safely deceive me. You cannot. You are bantering me now to hide facts and plans. You will tell me, please, what sort of secret understanding you have with Normia."

It was clear that we were in for a little contest of will power. I would not shirk it.

"A little plain speaking on both sides will do good," I agreed.

"That is not answering my question."

"I am not going to answer it, Stephanie," I said firmly.

Our eyes met in a long, steady stare.

"You set Normia before me?"

"Leave Normia out of this and settle our own relationship first."

"You set me at defiance, then?"

"I am going to be no mere marionette for you or anyone else to pull the strings as you

please. I don't dance to anyone's orders—man or woman."

"You have counted the cost?"

"Yes. You can do what you will." And again our eyes met fixedly.

She dipped a pen in the ink.

"If you will not answer my question I shall write to the police stating who you are."

I smiled. It was obvious that she dared not do that.

"Threaten something that you dare do," I said. "And when you threaten, remember how much I know."

Her eyes flashed at the word "dare," and, being a woman, the opposition drove her to persist in her mistake. She wrote a letter very deliberately, read it through, and addressed it.

"You are mistaking bluff for strength, Stephanie. Give me that letter if you dare, and I pledge my oath to take it to the police myself."

"You would betray even Normia, then?" she said, rising. She was still white with passion, and her lips quivered.

"Oh, no. Last night I was on the balcony when I heard the nature of the hold you have over Normia, and I know that she has nothing to fear from her government when that fact is known to them."

"Have you told her?"

"Yes." I noticed her hands tighten on the letter, and her brows came together in a frown. After a moment's pause she resumed her seat. "It is more serious than I thought,"

she said. Her tone was quiet, and her overt passion gone.

"You take the wrong line with me, Stephanie. You threaten me because you are angry, and perhaps jealous. I heard that last night. There is no cause. Normia can never be anything to me so long as I am under this terrible charge. I——"

"Have you told her your secret?" she broke in.

"Certainly not. I gave you my word, and I shall keep it; but if I can save her from the ruin that you are plunging her into, I shall. That was no part of our compact."

"Why did she come here?"

"I have no other reason to give than that already given."

"I know that is not true. You could not get a letter to her."

I smiled.

"You forget. You yourself accused her of having received a letter from me last night."

"What was that letter?" she flashed.

"You have already had her answer that there was nothing of the sort. Try at least to be reasonable. Tear up that foolish letter. We both know that it is no more than a blank cartridge. If you were in earnest in a threat of that sort you have only to utter a half-dozen words, and my life would not be worth ten minutes' purchase. I know that. I know I am completely in your power in that respect; but not in that way;" and I waved my hand toward the letter.

She sat fingering the letter strenuously, and at length looked up and asked :

" Do you care for her, Guy ? "

" I'll tell you what you may be glad to hear. Last night, after you had gone in with von Epstein, I found her alone and very miserable on the balcony. I begged her to let me help her ; and her reply was—she regarded it as an insult that I should even speak to her, and forbade me ever to do so again. You have done your part well, so far as making her despise me is concerned."

" But she came here to-day," she retorted quickly.

" Would you not have come had I threatened you to reveal everything ? "

" No, that is not the reason," she replied, shaking her head. " You are not the man to use such a threat to any woman. She came to seek your help."

" On my honour, no. Even after I had told her that she had no reason to fear your threats, she denounced me as a spy and refused to believe a word I said. You have done your work well in that respect, I repeat, even without that last ingenious attempt to blacken me in regard to this Greek girl."

" I was mad with anger. I was jealous, I know. But I love you so."

" That letter ? " I said, pointing at it significantly.

She tore it to shreds impulsively.

" You don't think I meant it. Do you believe I would send you to your death ? Oh, how you wrong me ! " she cried, wringing her hands.

"And I have risked so much for you." She got up and began to pace the room again in great agitation.

I deemed it best to say nothing. I had got out of giving an explanation much better than I could have hoped, and waited for her next move. It came soon.

After about a minute's pause she stopped in front of me. "I have made up my mind, Guy. After what has happened here to-day, I shall not feel sure of you until I am your wife. You cannot break away from me then."

"Which means?"

"That our betrothal shall be made public at once."

"Why not—except von Epstein? It will complicate matters with him, won't it?"

"This is more to me than the cause itself. Our marriage shall take place almost at once."

"Normia again?" I smiled.

"Normia again, if you will. But it must be so."

"Very well. Just as you like," I said lightly.

"Oh, don't use that tone to me," she cried with a very angry gesture.

"If I were to speak seriously and tell you all my thoughts about it, you might like it less," I replied earnestly, adding in the bantering tone: "Do you think we shall make a success of it? However, it's one of the little scenes of the comedy that I leave to you, and probably it will be safer. If I encourage the idea of the speedy marriage you will abandon that other idea—the happy despatch business."

"Have you nothing but these jibes for me, Guy?"

"Something sentimental? Certainly. I can turn it on at will. What vintage? Flowery, languishing, sparkling, melancholy? Give your orders."

"Oh, you madden me!" she cried, and was hurrying out of the room when I reminded her of the Catarina matter.

"I will deal with her," she said.

"How?"

"Do you think I will not protect you now?"

"Who is the girl?"

"She was Normia's maid-companion, but we suspected her of treachery and she was sent away."

"And Provost's share in the matter?"

"They were lovers. But at need she shall be driven away."

"Well, I hope you won't be jealous of her, too," I laughed.

She made no reply, and in silence we went down to her carriage.

As she settled herself in her seat she leant forward. "The marriage shall take place this day week, Guy. I cannot wait longer."

"Very well. Any time you please," I answered with a smile as though it were the best news in the world, and I waved my hand as she drove off.

In truth it was all the same to me whether she said a week or a year. What I had to do could be done in a week, and then—well, there would be no "then" for me.

I stood a moment gazing after the carriage

thoughtfully, and then walked slowly back up the stairs to my rooms. Before I reached them someone came running up after me in great haste.

It was Vosbach.

"Provost! Provost!" he called quickly.

I waited for him by the door of the room.

"What is it?" I asked as he reached me.

He was a little breathless, having run up so quickly.

"Catarina!" he said in a whisper. He was very excited.

"Well, what about her?"

"She is here—coming up the stairs now."

I listened, and heard someone just below the turn in the stairway.

In another moment she would reach us, and Vosbach would learn the reason why I was so unlike Gerard Provost.

And he could be trusted to spread the news far and wide.

It was about as awkward a situation as I had yet had to face. Discovery seemed inevitable, and how to avoid it baffled me.

CHAPTER XIV.

CATARINA.

I STOOD staring helplessly at Vosbach as I listened to Catarina's approaching footsteps, and it was not until her hat was already showing over the balustrade rail that my wits woke up.

I grabbed Vosbach, pulled him into my room, shut the door, and took him into the bedroom beyond.

"What are you going to do, man?" he asked.

"Have it out with her, but alone. We don't want any witnesses. You'll see that?"

She knocked at the door of the sitting-room as I spoke.

"There she is. You can't get away," he said.

"I'm not going to try. I want you to open the door to her, tell her I'm here, and will see her in a moment. Then take yourself off."

He hung back a second and laughed sheepishly.

"Of course I don't want to be present."

"Go on, like a good fellow. Don't keep her waiting, or she'll get wild."

I pushed him into the room, and he did precisely as I had asked, and I heard her pull a chair forward and sit down. I allowed him

time to get out of hearing, and then, without in the least knowing what I was going to do, I went in to her.

"At last, Gerard," she exclaimed, as I entered.

For the instant she was misled by the resemblance coupled with her confident anticipation. But recognition followed directly, and she sprang up and stared at me in profound amazement.

She was exceedingly handsome, even for a Greek. Dark as night, with a rich olive complexion, heavy straight brows which almost met, and long lashes fringing large eyes, now wide and wonder-filled and flashing with intense feeling.

A glance told me she was no ordinary woman. Every feature spoke of intelligence, resolution, and shrewdness; and in the expression of her liquid eyes and beautiful face, when allowance was made for her present emotion, I read heart and abundant womanly sympathy.

"I am aware that I have caused you a very painful surprise, mademoiselle," I began.

"Who are you, monsieur?"

"I am going to speak with perfect frankness. I shall put my life in your hands in doing so, but you are one to whom the truth must be revealed at any cost. I have that to tell you which, I fear, must give you infinite pain and grief. I beg you to be seated."

"I don't understand," she said. "Where is M. Provost?"

"I am supposed to be Gerard Provost, and

only you and one other person in Vienna know I am not. I urge you to nerve yourself to hear the worst, mademoiselle."

Her hands clenched, and she bit her lip as I said this.

"I am waiting, monsieur, in dire suspense."

"Gerard Provost is dead, mademoiselle, and I am falsely supposed to have killed him."

"Dead?"

Just a whispered echo of the word, followed by a deep, deep breath of acute agony. Her body stiffened, and she sat staring out blankly before her with a face as white and set as marble. The whole pose and manner were eloquent of infinite anguish, and, moved to profound sympathy, I turned away.

Some minutes of intense pain-filled silence followed.

"Tell me, monsieur," she said presently, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Gerard Provost was, as perhaps you know, only an assumed name. He was an Englishman, my cousin. His real name was Geoffrey Pershore; mine is much the same—Guy Pershore."

"You knew then that we—that we were betrothed?" Her lips faltered.

"I learnt it only after his death. I had not seen him for months, and knew——"

"You were his enemy." The words were as sharp as the glance was keen.

"In any bitter sense, no. We were not friends. That is all."

"How did he die, monsieur? And where?"

"A little more than a week ago, here in

Vienna. There was, as you will see, a very striking resemblance between us. I had had a warning that in consequence of certain political affairs I was in danger of assassination. I returned to my rooms one foggy evening and found him dead in my chair. He had been murdered; and my belief is that the deed was done by those who mistook him for me;" and I went on to describe in detail what had occurred. "I can now never free myself from this terrible position until I find the murderer and bring the crime home to him," I said in conclusion.

It was impossible to judge of the effect of my recital upon her. I spoke in a calm even tone, striving to make every syllable ring true and absolutely convincing of my sincerity. But not a muscle of her face moved, not a single sign or gesture did she give to show whether she believed me.

The silence was searching. She broke it at length to ask:

"And afterwards?"

"It was *my* death which was announced. I was said to have died under an operation. He was buried as Guy Pershore, and I became Gerard Provost."

"And no one discovered the difference?" unmistakable suspicion in her voice.

"It appears he was scarcely known to anyone except Andreas Vosbach. I was very ill for a week, and much changed in appearance. The fact of my being Provost was generally accepted, and for these reasons no one has yet detected the change."

Again she was silent for a long pause. This time she lifted her eyes and scanned my face searchingly, but without speaking lapsed again into thought.

"How came Gerard to visit your rooms?" was the next question.

"I did not know that he even knew my whereabouts in Vienna."

"And the three men who came afterwards, do you know them?"

"A Dr. Arnheim, a man named Yuldoff, and the third, Hammerstein."

"I know them." Then, after another pause: "You say someone knows who you are?"

"Baroness Dolgoroff."

At this reply, apparently quite unexpected, she looked up quickly, and her eyes flashed with anger.

"And the Princess Normia?"

"She believes me to be Gerard Provost. In my own name I knew her before in Belgrade, but she has been told I was then Provost, playing a part."

"The Baroness told her that, I am sure." Her lip curled. "You and the Baroness have not played a very honourable part, monsieur," she said slowly.

"Yet I have had a motive that is not wholly dishonourable."

"Tell me."

"At present I cannot. I have spoken with this complete frankness, because your relations with my unfortunate cousin made it right that you should know the truth. My motive does not concern that in any way. Let it suffice

that unless I can discover the assassin the accomplishment of my object will mean the end of things for me."

"Your object has nothing to do with that discovery?"

"Nothing."

"You will kill yourself?"

"But for that object I should not be alive to-day."

She fixed her great eyes on me, nodded her head, and her features relaxed into a smile as she said:

"Ah, you love, monsieur. And it is the Princess. I, too, love her."

It was more than disconcerting to have my thoughts read, and I could not wholly repress my surprise. "I can say only that my purpose is my own secret."

"Ah, monsieur, you need not be afraid to tell me. I too have loved and have sorrowed, and sympathy teaches heart to read heart. You are either one of the vilest men on earth, or one of the most unfortunate. How shall I know which?"

"I have no proof to give you, unless you hold it proof that it is no longer worth my while to lie to you. I have at most but a few days to live; I have put my secret into your hands, and by telling you that I am not Provost, it is in your power to shorten even those few days. In that way my purpose would be thwarted, but for no other reason has death any terrors for me."

"You would not seek this assassin, then, even if the chance came to you?"

"Would a poor devil of a shipwrecked sailor refuse to enter the lifeboat that came to save him? But my case is more hopeless than his. I dare not let myself hope for fear lest I should go mad."

She sat thinking intently. "You will tell me this purpose of yours?" she asked then. Her tone was sympathetic, even solicitous.

Her reference to Normia decided my reply.

"You have already guessed it," said I.

"Ah, monsieur, from my heart I grieve with you!" she cried with a sigh and a gentle lifting of the hands in sympathy.

"I should have feared you would be too engrossed by your own deep sorrow to have room in your heart for sympathy."

Her expression changed on the instant. Her eyes flashed, she threw up her head, and her face set with intense strength of purpose.

"I am a Greek, monsieur, and we Greeks wait to lament our dead until we have avenged them. Rest assured this deed shall not go unpunished, however hopeless such a quest may appear to you. Henceforth, it will be the one purpose of my life."

"Would to Heaven I could see a way to help you!" I cried.

"You are overquick to despair, monsieur. Besides, you have other thoughts. I shall have but one. I shall not fail. I have many means of finding out the truth."

"You will find what I have told you—that all who know a murder has been committed believe me to be the murderer?"

"And best so, is it not? The real murderer

will believe himself safe. You will help me in the search, for we have a common bond in it ? "

" You have but to show me how."

" You will continue to be known as M. Provost. I was to have confronted you to-night at Herr Grundelhof's, but of course now I shall not go. He and his colleague, Baumstein, are dangerous men, and if you go there to-night you will be in danger. They mean harm to you. You know their object, and that it touches your purpose ? "

" Yes. It is to learn the details I am going to-night."

" M. Provost was taken into the scheme because at the time I was in the service of the Princess, and it was thought that I could aid it. Even he did not know how I loved that most unfortunate girl. It was because I sought to help her to escape that the Baroness turned me away. That is a further bond between us."

" I thank you for this, and for your warning," I said earnestly.

" I warn you because I believe all you have told me, monsieur. A strong man does not seek a woman's pity, but her sympathy she may offer, and her trust. And my trust is yours absolutely, for the Princess's sake. I would say to you, my friend, put aside your despair ; together we will find the man who has put this blight on both our lives. And now tell me—I can bear it now that my purpose is formed—all the facts, as you know them, of Gerard's death."

" He was stabbed—I had forgotten——" I broke off as I remembered my possession of the

knife. "I have the weapon which was left in his heart."

I got it and handed it to her. She examined it without a tremor, looking at it long and earnestly; but when she turned her eyes to me I saw they were shining with unnatural brightness.

"It is stained, monsieur."

"It is stained, mademoiselle."

"It is his blood, monsieur?"

"Yes, his blood, mademoiselle."

She drew a deep breath.

"And having this, you could despair of tracing him? Monsieur! It is but to find the owner of this!"

"To me a hopeless search."

"Ah, you are not a Greek!" she cried excitedly. "And now the other question—was there anything to indicate the motive?"

"Nothing, except that, as I told you, my life had been threatened. That and the fact that nothing had been taken. It was not robbery."

"I do not call that nothing," she answered with a confident smile. "It narrows the circle. I may take this?" and she rose.

"Of course."

"Have faith, monsieur, even as I have confidence. And now, if I can help you in regard to the Princess, let me. I can find out things."

"If I need your help I will certainly come to you. Where can I find you?" She told me. "I pray Heaven you will succeed in your quest," I said.

Her face grew hard again, and she replied in

a tone of absolute conviction, as she offered me her hand: "In a cause like this and with a motive such as mine, a Greek never fails, monsieur."

She held my hand a moment, and fixed her large luminous eyes upon me.

"We stand together in the dark valley of sorrow, my friend, but have courage; together we will climb the pass and find the light. Courage!"

I was almost staggered by the result of the strange interview.

I had entered the room firmly convinced that the crisis had come, and that a few hours at most would see the end of Gerard Provost; and yet now here we were, firm allies, and I was positively beginning to hope, almost to believe, that what I had deemed the impossible would be actually accomplished by her.

I had not been able to persuade myself that anyone could be brought to believe my story of Provost's death; and that of all others, this Greek girl should have been able to perceive its truth, seemed little short of a miracle.

The fact excited me intensely. I was soon conscious of a complete change in myself. She had laid the foundation of hope, and I soon began to build all sorts of fancy castles upon it.

If she believed in my innocence I in turn had a strange trust in her capacity to discover the truth. She had infected me with some of her own calm conviction of success; and as the hours of that day slipped away, this conviction strengthened and my confidence rose.

The grim resolve to take my own life weak-

ened as hope quickened the blood in my veins. All my fighting instincts began to reassert themselves.

I would make a desperate struggle to retrieve my lost position in the world, to wipe the stain from my name, and clear myself from this infamous charge.

I would no longer be the man who was dead, but once more, MYSELF. And would fight for that end, not with the stubborn fatalism of despair, but with the live courage of confidence in myself and the set resolve to win.

I was still Provost, the spy, for the time; but a very different Provost from the swaggering swashbuckler I had shown myself. I was no longer the man under sentence of death. Freedom and honour were coming once again within reach, and I was a man with a future.

It was in this mood I started for the meeting with Grundelhof and his companions. There was considerable risk in attending it; but although I looked at the risk differently now, I had to run it. In no other way could I ascertain the scheme against Normia.

I knew well enough the reputation which Grundelhof had in the Servian army. He had been engaged in several desperate affairs, and he was alike physically powerful, brave, and reckless. In all respects a man to be labelled dangerous.

I had seen in the short interview with him on the preceding night, that he had persuaded himself that I was a coward and that he could ride roughshod over me. Before the night was out I should have to disabuse him on that point.

While he and others believed me to be a coward, I should be exposed to constant menace and interference.

It was a great point in my favour that he would act on this mistaken assumption; and with such a man I should need all the points I could find if I was not to come off badly.

I decided, therefore, to lay aside the swaggering manner for the time, and to wait quietly and coolly until he gave me such a chance as I sought.

I took my revolver with me, of course. I calculated that I should most probably need it in self-defence. That was the keynote of my attitude. I was to act only in my defence.

Strong in this resolve, I entered the room quietly, where I found four men already assembled and waiting for me.

CHAPTER XV.

FREEDOM IN SIGHT.

THE room which I entered was a large, square apartment, very plainly furnished. There was a small oblong table placed against the wall on the side opposite the door, and at the far end of the room a bay window, with a seat running the full length.

Grundelhof and Baumstein were sitting there together talking, and Vosbach and a fourth man I had not seen before, whose name I afterwards found out to be Thalberg—a slight, insignificant fellow, with a light moustache and a weak face —sat close to the table.

It was, of course, obvious that the two first were those with whom I should have to reckon. Vosbach had proclaimed himself on my side, and I regarded the fourth man as of no particular account. He was likely to side with the stronger party if any trouble arose.

Grundelhof and his companion, after a side glance at my entrance, took no notice, going on with their conversation as if I were beneath contempt. This nettled me, and I crossed the room, nodding to Vosbach, who approached me with a look of concern, as if regretting that I had come, and rapped Grundelhof smartly on the shoulder.

"Where are your manners, Grundelhof?"

I asked, roughly. "You're the host, you know."

He sprang up with an oath.

"Are you drunk?" he cried, fiercely.

Baumstein, a fellow with a cynical turn, intervened to prevent a quarrel at that early stage. He rose and made me a mocking bow.

"Gentlemen, bow—His Majesty King Gerard Provost is with us." The rest laughed at this.

But I did not let the laugh remain with him. I flung my hat in his sneering face.

"Good! Take his Majesty's hat—you"

Baumstein flushed with anger and raised his hand as if to strike me, but Grundelhof stopped him and caught his arm.

"It's treason to strike your sovereign, Baumstein," he said with a rasping laugh.

I turned away to the table and spoke to Vosbach, who had stared in amazement at the little scene. The other two remained whispering together.

"Why did you come, Provost?" he whispered.

"My dear fellow, why should I stop away?"

"Well, but what are you going to do?"

"What are we all going to do?"

"You're so devilish strange. I can't make you out."

"I'm going to be married to-night, am I not? It's a serious venture. By the way, where's Catarina? She told me she was to be here." I raised my voice for the benefit of the other two, and laughed. "And where's the priest?"

They came to the table then.

"Is your Majesty ready to proceed to business?" asked Grundelhof. "If so, we'll take your report."

"I think we had better first know exactly where we stand. You two have been whispering together for some time. What have you settled?"

"Mind your own business," he retorted.

"It's a pretty open guess that it is my business. Do you intend to shut me out of this affair?"

"Where is the money you brought from Belgrade?" he snapped.

"If your Majesty can bring your exalted mind down to the consideration of such an insignificant matter as money," put in Baumstein.

I took no notice of either remark and lighted a cigar.

"Well," said Grundelhof.

"Provost!" interposed Vosbach.

"If you are going to stand this sort of thing I'm not," I said to him. "Those two have been arranging some secret plan of their own, and before anything else is done they will have to tell us what it is."

"Do you mean to dictate to us?" demanded Grundelhof, with an oath.

"Don't be profane, Grundelhof. You quite shock me," I sneered.

"The chief shock has to come yet. Where is that money?"

"When I was in Belgrade I learnt things about you, Grundelhof, which led me to know that all this talk of yours about money and

my report are no more than a bluff by which you wish to put me out of this affair. You brought Vosbach into it because he could get me; and you got me because you thought I could help through Catarina. Now that she is no longer in the Princess's service, you want to get rid of me; and you and Baumstein have been planning to do the thing in some other way. Until that's cleared up my lips are sealed."

"I know you had the money given to you," he retorted.

"And at the same time you had a report of what I had done in Belgrade. Now are you going to tell us what your new plan is?"

"Are you going to hand it over?"

"I think that even your Majesty——" began Baumstein, when I cut him short.

"We've had enough of that, and had better be serious. I have come to-night prepared to do my share in the work and to agree upon plans. If you mean to throw me over, I shall just refer the whole matter to the Baroness Dolgoroff."

"You infernal spy!" cried Grundelhof.

"Spy? Spy?" I echoed, looking at him intently. "If it comes to spying, there is something I know about both of you that will deeply interest both the Prince and the Baroness in regard to two such faithful and devoted followers as you—facts about your army career, captain. You had better run straight with me."

He jumped to his feet, white with rage.

"It's my opinion he means to steal the money and carry it off with this infernal bluster,"

he cried, fiercely. "I'm not going to be set at defiance by a paltry lying spy like this. What do you say, Baumstein?"

"I should think we can make his Majesty talk and disgorge too," he said, rising and standing at the other man's side.

"And you, Thalberg?"

"I'm with you," was the reply.

"And you, Vosbach?"

"Provost, I think you should explain."

"You see, we're all agreed, Provost. I'll give you a last chance to speak and save trouble."

It was now evident that I was not going to get the information I wanted as to their plans, but I made a further attempt.

"I'll pay over the money. How much did they tell you had been given to me, Grundelhof?"

This produced the effect I desired. It divided them. Vosbach was for hearing all I had to say, and Thalberg was with him. They were after money, but Grundelhof and his friend had been frightened by my threat.

"He's only lying to save his skin," he said excitedly.

A hot altercation followed between the four, in which he used my threat as a proof of treachery, and declared that none of them was safe while I lived.

While it proceeded I was gauging my chances and measuring the two men and making my plan. I knew that he would bear down the others' opposition and carry his will, and when he appeared to be on the point of succeeding, I pushed my chair back.

"I'll go and fetch the money," I said.

"You won't leave the room, Provost," declared Grundelhof, fiercely. "Baumstein!" and at this the latter went to the door to stop my going.

It was a mistaken tactic on their part, because it left me at liberty to deal with their attack singly. But Grundelhof was still of the opinion that he could tackle me alone, as he had thrashed me before, and this confidence was probably the reason why he did not draw a weapon.

He saved his life by that forbearance. My hand was on my revolver in my pocket, and had he drawn, I should have shot him without showing my pistol.

As it was he answered, very curtly, a last protest from Vosbach against any violence, and, pushing him aside roughly, he let out an oath and came at me.

I met him with a blow from my fist in the face, and sent him staggering back against Thalberg. In a moment the scene was one of pretty lively confusion.

Baumstein, who was by the door and behind me, fired, but in the confusion missed his aim; and before he could give me a second barrel I flung a heavy chair at him, and while he was dodging it I rushed on him and tore the revolver out of his hand. He was a much smaller man than I, and I flung him away into a corner just as Grundelhof had recovered himself and was feeling for his weapon.

"You won't draw that, Grundelhof," I called,

"I FLUNG A HEAVY CHAIR AT HIM."

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covering him with Baumstein's weapon. "I shall fire if you try to."

His reply was to whip it out. But before he could level it, a bullet from my pistol broke his arm. He cursed me volubly as I rushed forward and kicked the revolver out of reach where he was striving to pick it up with his left hand.

"He mustn't go, Baumstein," he called; and the latter, having plenty of pluck and being desperately afraid that I should use my liberty to tell what I knew about them, came at me again like a vicious terrier. But he was unarmed. So I let him come close up, and then caught him by the throat and hurled him back against Grundelhof, who now held an ugly-looking knife in his left hand.

Then I picked up the other revolver and put my back to the wall. I had no longer anything to fear from the pair, and as Vosbach and Thalberg showed no inclination to take a hand in the struggle, the danger was practically over.

"Don't try any more tricks with me," I said. "I can use these things better than either of you. Put that knife down, Grundelhof, unless you want another proof that I can shoot straight."

He hesitated and scowled at me threateningly. I levelled my weapon, and with a curse he threw the knife away.

"I reckon you're in no sort of mood to talk more about this business to-night. But if you mean to go on with it and will go straight with me, I'll do my part still. You can decide that with Vosbach here, and he can let me know. If

you do go straight, you two, your secret is safe with me."

With that I left. I had accomplished one thing—I had made them understand that it was not safe to try violent methods. But I had failed in my principal object; for I had not learnt anything of their plans in regard to Normia. I had frightened them both by showing that I knew them, but that was a very doubtful advantage.

It was possible that the hint I had thrown out on leaving might bear fruit, and I waited for Vosbach's visit with some impatience.

It was nearly midnight when he arrived.

"I'm glad you beat them, Provost, but you'll have to look out. They'll have your life, I believe, if they can."

"What have you settled? Anything? You've been a long time."

"We had to wait while Arnheim was sent for, and then while he dressed Grundelhof's arm. It's a nasty smash. I say, you were quick. I'd no idea you could shoot like that."

"Never mind my shooting. Did you decide anything?"

He laughed.

"They're afraid to go on without you now. I believe they had some plan of their own, but you've knocked that out of them. We are to meet again in a week—to give him a chance to get his arm right—and then decide."

"A week? Why, the thing could be done and over long before that. Were they fooling you, do you think?" I was suspicious.

"Oh, no. You've stopped all that right

enough. But what do you think Baumstein let out about what they think of you now ? "

" Well ? "

" They think the Dragoness has got round you and that you and she mean to do the thing without them. They declare that the money is giving out for all the Black House business. That Lepova has found all he can and von Epstein dried up ; and that she wants money badly."

" Moonshine, man. Why the money I brought from Belgrade would be a big fortune for you or me."

" Baumstein has a knack of getting to know things."

" Well, so far as I am concerned it's a fairy tale ; and all the rest is rubbish. Why, for the Baroness to do such a thing would mean the end of the whole plot, man ! "

" I wish you could have heard Baumstein."

" Well, then, there is nothing for it but to wait the week," I said.

" I am to tell Alexandrov that he had better go away for that time at least. That shows they are in earnest."

This reference to the mysterious Alexandrov piqued me, but I would not risk putting a question about him. It was probable that I ought to know him well, and Vosbach was getting to be too useful for me to take a chance of scaring him and re-starting his suspicions.

" It does look all right," I agreed lightly. " We'll see what happens."

I did not tell him my suspicions about the news he had brought. I did not believe for a

moment that Grundelhof was the man to postpone the venture, merely because he had a damaged arm. His instructions from Belgrade were likely to be of the most peremptory character, far too urgent for him to sit idle for a whole week with no definite plan at the end of that time.

It was far more probable that the pair had concocted the story of the proposed delay in order to mislead Vosbach and myself; and that they would use the time to carry out a plan by themselves. The more I thought of it the clearer did it appear that it was just a ruse to keep me quiet.

But I had a key to their actions—this fellow, Alexandrov. So far as I understood the matter, they had all along intended that he should be the actual instrument of carrying out the abduction, after they had made the arrangements leading up to it. They were, of course, to remain in the background, so that if the attempt failed, they would be at liberty to arrange a fresh one.

Clearly, my first step must be to get at this Alexandrov and ascertain his movements. In this Catarina could probably give me valuable help. I remembered that it was she who, as Vosbach had told me, had announced to him the arrival of Alexandrov in the city, and no doubt she could tell me how to find him.

In the meantime, while watching on my own account, I would put Stephanie on her guard about the scheme; but while thinking this over, a very disquieting reflection occurred to me. Although I was supposed to be dead,

yet all that had happened had not entirely cut the ties which bound me to my old chief and the Servian government. And Grundelhof and his companion were, like myself, emissaries from that government.

To denounce them to Stephanie as spies would mean their death sentence; and I could not contemplate such an act for a moment. I had already gone dangerously near to the line of treachery, and any warning to Stephanie must not include the giving up of the names.

The next morning I set off for Catarina's house, but only to learn that she was out of the city, and from there I went to Stephanie.

"I was writing to you to come to me, Guy," she said on my entrance. "I have arranged everything for the announcement of our betrothal. The day after to-morrow I am giving a reception here in the evening for the purpose."

"Just as you will. You mean to have it public enough."

"Is that all you have to say, and the pleasantest look you can give about it? You haven't even your comedy looks on."

"I have serious news. There is an attempt on the way to abduct Normia and hand her over to the people in Servia."

She gave a start and looked sharply at me.

"How do you know, and what do you know?" she asked.

"I am Provost the spy," I answered with a grim smile. "But I know only the bald fact so far. I shall learn more later I expect."

"Who is in it?"

"I can't tell yet."

She smiled confidently.

"It can only fail. We watch Normia too closely. She is the very pivot of our whole plans. But I am glad you have warned me. And now let us talk about the day after to-morrow. I am full of it"; and she went back to that subject and told me her plans.

Twice again I went to Catarina's house, and returned from my third visit in a very impatient temper. I was disposed to grudge even hours to Grundelhof, lest he might hurry on his plans; and I passed a tossing restless night.

But the next morning brought me such news from Catarina that all my pulses were set throbbing fast :—

"DEAR FRIEND, — Can you come to me about noon? I have the gladdest of tidings for you. I have already discovered him whom we both seek. Think of it! Already! Did I not bid you have courage, and tell you that we would climb the pass?—CATARINA."

It seemed too good to be true, and in a positive fever of excitement I waited for the hour she had named to come. I could scarcely contain myself in my rapture at the thought that deliverance from the curse and bondage of this imposture was really at hand.

Even the thought of Normia's danger was forgotten for the moment.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAN WE SEEK IS JULIUS DROMACH.

I WAS pacing the room in the condition of excitement caused by Catarina's wonderful news when Prince Lepova was shown in. In view of the terms on which we had last parted, I was not a little surprised to find him conciliatory, and even friendly.

I had made myself so exceedingly unpleasant on the occasion of Normia's interrupted visit, and had shown myself such an egregiously bumptious braggart to him, that I looked for nothing from him but hostility. Had the positions been reversed, I should have felt more inclined to offer kicks instead of courtesy.

But he offered a quasi-apology for what he termed his "intrusion," and expressed the desire that I would spare him a few minutes, for the reason that he thought "a little frank interchange of views would be advantageous to both."

I was only too ready to agree. I wished sincerely to get to know something more of him. He had impressed me as a reserved, self-contained man, whose generally unruffled surface covered implacable determination, tireless energy, and indomitable will-power. Contemptuously tolerant of trifling opposition, but hard as

chilled steel in the face of antagonism that counted, and shrewd enough to distinguish on the instant between the two. In a word, a dangerous man.

He began by congratulating me upon my betrothal to Stephanie, and led me at first to understand that that was the cause of his visit.

"Such an event, considering the important part which Baroness Dolgoroff takes in our cause, makes me naturally desirous that the relations between you and myself should be as cordial as possible, monsieur."

"Permit me to reciprocate that desire, Prince."

"Hitherto, we have not been exactly successful, perhaps, in understanding one another," he continued with a bland and frank smile. "But we are both men of the world, and, I trust, sufficiently interested mutually in the advancement of our cause to forget that there has been any roughness. Frankly, I regret if on any occasion I may have given you cause of offence, either by my words or manner. Will you accept that?" And he held out his hand with a quite engaging smile.

"Certainly," I agreed readily, "if you will accept my apologies for a manner which, I am aware, must have been intolerably provoking. I have to play many parts, Prince, and at times make serious blunders."

He waved his hand as if to dismiss the whole subject, and then considerably disconcerted me with the sudden question:

"Will you tell me what were your relations

toward the Princess Normia in Belgrade, monsieur ?"

"'Relations' is not exactly the term I should use. I did not then know she had any claims as a member of the Obrenowitz family. I was of some little service to her, as the Baroness told you; but she believed me to be the Englishman, Guy Pershore, and immediately on my arrival here I found that I had incurred her contempt. She made that unmistakably plain on the night of the ball at the Black House."

This was all true, but not the whole truth; and I think he saw it.

"You know that she is not whole-hearted in the cause ?"

"So the Baroness has told me."

"You know nothing of your own knowledge ?" he persisted.

I smiled, and spread my hands out.

"How should I under such circumstances ?"

He tried not to show that he knew I was fencing, and said very graciously:

"I regret that attitude of hers toward you, monsieur, and it will be my care to endeavour to modify it." He left that subject then, but only to go to another which was even more embarrassing. "And now I wish you to tell me all the details of your visit to Belgrade."

"I would do so readily, Prince, but you have probably heard that on my return I had a very serious nerve breakdown, and my memory for recent events has so suffered in consequence that it would be impossible for me to answer your question—absolutely impossible."

"This is a great disappointment to me, monsieur. I heard of your illness, and with great regret. I was most anxious to speak with you. Can you not remember anything?"

"Not even the names of those whom I saw. I told the Baroness everything I knew on the evening of my return."

"Can you recall nothing of the impressions you gathered as to the opinions of our friends in Belgrade?" And in this way we continued for some time a see-saw of direct probing questions from him and fencing remember-nothing replies from me.

I was able to gather that he was very full of anxiety about the future of matters, but whether or not he believed my story that I had forgotten everything, I could not tell. He appeared, however, to be genuinely anxious to get at my opinions, while I was just as resolved to conceal them from him.

"I am not yet the Baroness's husband," I said, when he was pressing me. "And so far, no more than a man in the ranks."

"I know how resolute you are as a man in the ranks, monsieur, and I have no doubt you will be glad to hear that I am going to give you a still further chance of proving your staunchness." He accompanied the words with a keen, searching glance, thinly covered by a smile.

There was evidently a good deal behind the words.

"I am very glad, of course, to have your confidence," I replied.

"Let me first say that I am pleased to

have had this conversation, M. Provost. I find that others have been misled by the mannerisms you have assumed, but I have been confident from the first that they were merely assumed. I have never yet had an opportunity of thanking you as you deserve to be thanked for the great service you rendered us all in regard to the Englishman, Pershore. It was a great deed, monsieur—a splendid proof at once of your courage and zeal."

It was a novel experience to be thanked for having murdered myself, but distinctly unwelcome as a preface to an invitation to commit another "great deed" of the same character. And that was how I read his meaning.

"I don't wish to be asked to give another proof of the same sort," I said decidedly.

He passed the protest by.

"You have gained a very beautiful and exceptional woman for your bride, monsieur. I offer you my warmest congratulations."

"I am, I trust, fully alive to the Baroness's great qualities," I murmured.

"And of course you know that great prizes cannot be won in this world without creating jealousies and rancour. But you will be more than able to deal with anything of the kind."

"Which means?"

"You will have a powerful enemy in the Baron von Epstein;" and he fixed his piercing black eyes on me; "and this betrothal will make him an enemy also of the cause. I shall therefore look to you to see that he has

no opportunity of wreaking his private malice upon us. He could ruin everything."

"I have no wish to quarrel with him, and no intention."

He smiled with intense significance.

"He will be at the reception at the Black House to-morrow night, given in honour of your betrothal to the Baroness, and I am sure we can rely upon you should he force a quarrel upon you."

"In plainer terms, you wish me to kill him?"

"None of us will be safe for a day while he lives, after this, monsieur," he said as he rose. "As I say, both the Baroness and I rely upon you in the matter."

And, having committed that pleasing little task to me, he went away. I could not restrain a grim sort of smile that I should be expected to commit a murder as the price of the hateful farce of this betrothal to Stephanie.

However, I had no time then to think about it, as it was close to noon, and I had to start for the interview with Catarina. I should have to find a way to get out of the mess with von Epstein when the occasion arose.

The moment we met I saw by Catarina's face that she had been suffering acutely since the former interview. She was very pale, and the dark rims round her eyes spoke of sleepless nights and searching trouble, but her eyes shone with the glow of success.

She was dressed in deep mourning and the black costume formed a striking setting for the white, regular features.

"You are behind your time, monsieur, and yet your face is alive with impatience," she said as she gave me her hand. "You are a changed man."

"I am on fire with impatience and should have been before my time but for a matter of much importance. Tell me all, please. You have succeeded? You are wonderful."

"Without you I could have done nothing. You put the clue in my hands. I had but to ask a question to learn all we needed."

"Tell me," I repeated impatiently.

"The man who killed Gerard is a Greek named Julius Dromach—a man who has pestered me with his love. His motive was, without doubt, jealousy. He has more than once threatened to kill him even in my presence."

"How did you find it out?"

"The weapon was his, monsieur. It is in many ways a remarkable one and could not be easily mistaken, and the instant I showed it to Alexandrov he recognised it. He has seen it often in Dromach's possession and once tried to buy it."

"Then all we have to do is to get him arrested and charged. We can bring it home to him—you are sure?"

"I have taken a vow never to rest until that is done," she replied earnestly. "And it is clear enough. He was in Vienna on that day and he was seen close to the house both just before and just after the time you told me the deed must have been committed."

"'Was' in Vienna?" I echoed with sudden misgivings.

"He fled at once—that same night, and has not been seen here since. But flight will not save him from me. We heard he was in Retz, a little place to the north among the hills, and we went in search of him. That was why you did not find me when you came here. But your face falls. You are disappointed. Why?"

"I ought not to be. But time is everything to me—even hours," I answered, somewhat moodily.

"When I saw you last you despaired of success even at any time; and now, when we know, you expect everything on the instant."

"I know I am unreasonable. But——"

"Ah, monsieur, you must have patience. I told you I should unearth this mystery. You doubted. I tell you now, that as surely as Julius Dromach walks the earth, I will find him. But you must have *some* patience."

"I had hoped for too much, and had built upon the hope. You will find him, I do not doubt; but it may so easily be too late for me."

She fixed her large, sad eyes on mine and then smiled.

"It is the impatience of love, monsieur, yours—at least, if I read you aright."

"You read me easily, mademoiselle."

"It may be that I have a clue. I have heard of you often, monsieur, when I was at the Black House. I had my Princess's confidence, and she often spoke of you. Did not you wonder that I should so easily believe the strange story you told me when we met?"

"I understand now, then."

She smiled.

"You should not so easily despair. Your love and my hate make a force that should not even think of failure."

"I am not beaten—far from it. But I must change my plans to suit this delay."

"Have you not told the Princess your secret?"

"I am bound by oath not to speak of it to anyone."

"Were you a Greek she would know of it," she replied with one of her inscrutable smiles. "Why did you come here yesterday?"

"I want news about this man Alexandrov."

"Ah! you do not wish the Princess to be carried to Servia?"

I stared at her in amazement.

"Are you a witch?"

"If it is part of a witch's work to give a good man hope, yes. But I know what happened at Herr Grundelhof's. It was daring, but all wrong. You made a mistake in your impetuous temper which you would have regretted all your life, were it not that Alexandrov is my friend."

"You continue to mystify me."

"There is no mystery. I know that you went to that meeting to find out the plan of these men. Had you been a Greek, you would have contented yourself with finding it out; but, being hot-headed, you chose rather to force a quarrel. You forgot that the memory of an insult can live, and revenge be just as sweeping late as soon. The result? You were

shut out from the scheme altogether. It is not thus that you will save your Princess," and she threw up her hands and shook her head with a gesture of reproach.

"I have a great capacity for doing the wrong thing, I admit. But do you know the new plan these men have formed?"

She paused.

"You require a great deal of helping, monsieur, and I should like to feel more sure of your discretion than I do. There is need for something more than mere daring, and I should have to make a condition."

"I don't always make a fool of myself," I murmured, nettled by her words, despite the admission I had just made. "Is Alexandrov to leave Vienna?"

"Will it profit the Princess for you to turn angry even with me, M. Hothead?" The rebuke was conveyed more in the manner than the words. Then, with a change, she added: "Listen, and let us understand one another. The matter is difficult, because—well, because you are not a Greek. Alexandrov is not really to leave Vienna. He is to do the actual work, so that no chance of suspicion shall fall on the others. This was all arranged from the first. He will tell me everything, but"—she paused, and looked meaningly at me—"but he has bound me by a sacred oath I cannot break not to tell a soul."

"Then what is the use of——"

She stopped me with a glance and a gesture of the hand.

"You are brave, monsieur, but you are not

quick. It is no wonder you are in this trouble. You must know this thing; the interests of the Princess I love demand it."

She paused again, and I stared at her in perplexity.

"If you were a Greek, or even of the East, you would have seen my meaning."

"I don't," I said bluntly.

"Alexandrov is coming here soon, and he will tell me all he knows when I press him."

"So you said before. I am waiting, mademoiselle," I said, when she stopped.

"Ah! And you deserve to wait, monsieur—and so you should wait were it not for the Princess. I have no patience with such dulness," she cried vehemently and almost angrily. Then she laughed at her own impetuosity. "If you were a Greek, or really Gerard Provost, you would have cunning enough to see that I should not have to break my oath and tell you a word—if you were to overhear what Alexandrov tells me."

It was certainly very Greek, and I laughed.

"It is good that my ears are quicker than my wits have been in this instance," I answered.

"You will do it, then?" she asked, a little surprised at my readiness, I think.

"I must learn the plan at any cost," I answered.

"You must not be seen. If he even thought that you had been to this house or that I had seen you, he would lie to deceive me in order to lead you astray, and we should also lose his help in finding Dromach. It is he who is doing this for us. I shall place you

in the room behind this, where I have a means by which every word uttered can be overheard."

More Greek simplicity.

"I will not be seen," I agreed.

"Nor must you make a sound to betray your presence. One further condition—the greatest. Whatever you do afterwards, you must pledge me your word that no harm shall come to Alexandrov. Save the Princess, but not to his harm."

I gave her the pledge readily.

"I will take an Englishman's word where I should hesitate at the oath of another. There is but one thing more you should know. I have had to pay a price for Alexandrov's help in revenging Gerard. I am to become his wife."

I had long ceased to be surprised at anything she told me.

"I wish you a life of content and happiness, mademoiselle," I said.

She repressed a sigh as she answered:

"I shall be revenged, and that for me will mean content. I ask no more. Will you come?"

She led me into the room adjoining, and, pulling a small panel out of the wall of communication, pointed out to me where to sit.

"You must not move from here until I come to you again," was her last injunction.

Then she went out, locked the door behind her, and took away the key—also very Greek. Left to myself, I had some unpleasant qualms on the subject of eavesdropping as a means of aiding her to evade the obligation of her oath, and had I been really a Greek or an Oriental, I should have felt vastly less uncomfortable than I did feel.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

I HAD plenty of time to meditate upon the questionable character of my conduct and the relative sufficiency of my motive for playing the spy in earnest, for I must have waited nearly an hour before the deep roll of a man's voice announced the arrival of Alexandrov.

"You are late," declared Catarina, vexation and a touch of shrewishness in her tone. "Is this how you keep your word?"

"Nay, scold not. It is your matter which has kept me." The fellow had a deep, rich voice, exquisitely modulated, and the soft Greek accents rolled from his tongue like music.

"You bring me news, then? You know how the fire burns in me?"

"The fire which I, Alexandrov, will quench. Yes, I bring you news. Dromach is returning to Vienna. Is not that enough to brighten your eyes and gladden your heart?"

"When?" asked Catarina practically.

"I will tell you." There was a pause, and I heard a match struck. "I was this morning at his lodging, at the house of old Steinberg, that thief of a Jew shoemaker. Ah! do not look like that at me. He knows I am Dromach's friend. I went only to buy a pair of shoes, and to put him in a good humour I

let him cheat me. And while he cheated me, we talked. I owed Dromach money, I said. My money burnt in my pocket—you know how true that is, beloved—and I wanted to pay him before it had all burnt away."

"Well?"

"I am to the full as impatient as you, Catarina, sweetest of women. Do I not long for my reward by day and dream of it by night?"

"It is not yet half earned, Alexandrov."

"Half earned! On my soul, but it is! Listen. The old Jew wanted me to give him the money against Dromach's return. 'He wants money, friend Alexandrov,' he told me. 'He has written to me for some that I hold of his. But no, I trust no posts. He might swear he had never received it, and I shudder to think of it even—I might have to pay twice over. "Come and fetch it, Dromach, my friend," I wrote him. And come he shall, or never have it.' And come he must, Catarina. And when I heard it I laughed, and said to myself, 'The shoes are dear, but the news is cheap. And my Catarina will smile to me in glee.'"

"When will he come?"

"To-day, to-morrow, or two days hence, or perhaps three. What matters? For when he comes"—and here his tone changed to one of fierce earnest—"I will take him by the throat, and, holding the knife before his eyes, I will shake the truth out of him and drag him to you that he may repeat it."

"It will be well—if he comes," said Catarina thoughtfully.

"If he comes not, then together we will seek and find him. But why should he not come? Tell me that, thou lovely doubter. What word has ever been breathed that the case was one of murder? If he did it—mark that 'if,' for I am not yet persuaded it was his hand and not that of this Provost himself, for all his cunning tale to thee. But if he did it, why should he go in fear? He fled in fear, of course; 'twas but natural. But when he finds no hue and cry raised, his fear will pass. Oh, he will come; and I will drag him to thy feet—I, even Alexandrov, and claim the sweet reward. You shall clear your Provost from the crime, but you shall keep your oath with me."

Another proof of her cunning here. She had not betrayed me even to him, leaving him to believe only that he was clearing me from suspicion.

"Do you doubt me? Your tone is that of doubt," she said after a short pause.

"Beloved, I would as soon—nay, sooner—doubt myself!"

"And about the Princess, Alexandrov?"

There was a pause.

"Why are you so set on knowing?" he asked with a touch of suspicion in his voice.

Catarina laughed—a hard, mirthless, unpleasant laugh it was.

"Because I am a woman. Because I am a Greek. Because it was in her cause that this was done. Because if I can love, so also I can hate. Because I was flung out of that great house. Because I will trust you only so far

as you will trust me. Take your choice of the reasons, or take none as you will, and go and leave me to my task alone. But if you do not trust me——"

Bitterly and vehemently spoken, especially the broken sentence. I could picture her look as she uttered the unfinished threat. She knew the man well.

"If I tell you——"

"No if's, Alexandrov. Go!" she interposed sharply.

"But——" He stopped, and I could fill in the gesture which stopped him. "Wood of the Cross, but you are not in earnest, Catarina?"

"There is but one man in all the empire to whom I have told this secret, and now, if I know aught of you, I have done wrong."

"It is not fair—it is not——"

"Go!" she cried in a shrill, vehement voice. "You have deceived me! You have lied to me. I will never see you again!"

There was another pause—longer this time.

"I will tell you," he said then. "But remember your oath. You have sworn by the Holy One never to let a word pass your lips. You swear?"

She took the oath in a firm, clear voice.

"It would ruin everything, and we should lose the money."

The bathos of this drew a smile from me. But the man was intensely in earnest. In the silence another match was struck. Then he laughed.

"He is a slippery fox, that Grundelhof; but he will not slip me. I trust him as much

as I trust this smoke to carry me to the clouds. He found out, though, that Provost meant to play false, Catarina. Mark that. What have I always said of your Provost?"

"Have a care, Alexandrov," and Catarina's voice was low and dangerous.

"Well, I have. And now it is his turn. They have put him out of the scheme. They have other means than using him through you to find me the chance. But he won't tell me. He is close-lipped now, and tells me nothing. He thinks me a fool, and forgets I am a Greek. He will use me to shield him from suspicion. He is a fox, I say. But it is a small wood that holds no more than one fox, Catarina." And he laughed with much self-complacency.

She took no notice of his pauses.

"See this, angel one. When it is over, others will want to know things. Then my turn will come. I shall go to him and say! 'Gentle Austrian, questions are being asked; Alexandrov is but a poor man; he was misled into this business, and his lips will be opened or closed, just as he is paid.' To think of using me, Alexandrov, and toss me away like an olive stone." Viciously uttered and right from the heart this threat of future blackmailing.

"You are no match for him. Don't boast, Alexandrov," she replied quietly.

He fired instantly. She could play on his moods with a certain touch.

"No match? We shall see! You shall see, beloved. I can trust myself. Only wait. My part is easily done. I have but to seize the

girl and get her out to where a swift and silent motor-car will be in waiting, and the rest follows. We take her some distance from the city—I know not where—and hand her to those who seek her."

"When will it be?" asked Catarina, for my benefit, as I knew.

"When the chance comes; I know no more. But it must be soon, for the eyes of your Provost have to be kept shut meanwhile. It will be at night, of course; but I shall not know until the last moment. The Fox does not trust me. I know no more, I swear to you by the Cross. Now, will you say I do not trust you, dear one?"

The interview lasted some time longer, and Catarina plied him with questions to test the truth of what he had said; and as his replies bore out his assertion that he knew no more, I soon ceased to listen.

Beyond the confirmation of my surmise that the attempt would be made without my help, I had learnt very little and my thoughts fastened on the one point—what was the help they were going to obtain in my place?

It baffled me. I did not know enough of the people surrounding Normia to be able to fix on anyone. Stephanie might know. I must see her at once, and again warn her. All those in attendance on Normia should be replaced by others, for it was clear that we must look for the traitor in that narrow circle.

Normia herself must also be warned; but how to get to her was another baffling puzzle. Moreover, every precaution I urged Stephanie

to take would but make my own attempt to save Normia the more difficult the instant I was in a position to make it. The situation grew in difficulty every time I studied it.

I was absorbed in these thoughts when Catarina came back to me.

"You heard everything, monsieur?" she asked. She was full of Dromach. "You see, we have indeed found him. You heard he is returning to Vienna."

"I wish to heaven he was back already."

"Patience, monsieur, patience. Your wish is but as water to hot blood compared to mine, but I can have patience. A day or so—a few hours, maybe—and all will be well. Patience, I say. Meanwhile, do as you will about other matters. Don't tell me. But remember your pledge—that Alexandrov comes to no harm. I can do no more for you. You may safely go now."

I was naturally in a state of the greatest excitement at what I had heard. We knew even the name of Provost's murderer, the possession of the weapon could be traced to him, and his presence near the scene of the crime before and after its commission could be proved. His arrest was certain to follow soon, and the instant he was in our hands I should be able to declare myself; even beforehand, if it were necessary. The promise of success thrilled me with delight.

In my exhilaration I resolved to attempt to get an interview with Normia, to warn her of the plot against her, and, if possible, to induce her

to make that submission to the Servian Government I had already urged.

To get to her would be a matter of great difficulty. Stephanie maintained the closest watch; the servants in attendance upon her were spies; and no one was allowed access to her apartments without the permission of either Stephanie or Prince Lepova. That either of them would grant me such permission was not to be thought of for a moment.

If I was to succeed it would have to be by some kind of ruse, secretly; or by bribing one of the people about her. My difficulties were all the greater because I was not even certain of the exact location of the rooms. I knew that they were somewhere in the right wing of the great house, and that the way to them was through a pair of large folding doors at the head of the chief staircase, where a man was always on duty. He knew me, of course, but equally of course he would not let me pass.

It was upon him that I thought of trying the effect of a bribe, but better luck was with me that afternoon. As I entered the house he was standing in the hall, talking to the man in charge. I gave the latter to understand that I was in a hurry to see Stephanie, and running up the stairs quickly, succeeded in getting through the folding doors unobserved.

Fortune was still with me. I found myself in a long, wide picture gallery, at the farther end of which were another pair of tall folding-doors, as well as one or two other ordinary doors; and the place was in considerable con-

fusion as the result of some work which was in progress close to the far end.

Several pictures were down, statues were draped, and a number of busts were off their pedestals and huddled together in a corner, covered with dust sheets, and all that part of the gallery was littered with ladders, workmen's tools, and the general mess that builders know well how to make.

On the instant I had a plan. I slipped on a workman's blouse, snatched up a foot-rule and the first tool I could lay my hands on, and began to make my observations. If anyone came I could easily have a tale ready.

I guessed that the large folding-doors led through to Normia's apartments, and I could pass them safely enough under the pretence of seeking someone to get some instructions about the work in progress.

But the nature of the work roused my curiosity, and I perceived that it was probably due to the warning I had given Stephanie. Some strong bars were being placed on the outside of the windows, and as these casements opened outwards, the work had to be done both inside and out.

The men had evidently left work for the day, and the casements had been taken out and insecurely replaced for the night, and a ladder was in position outside with a small staging on which the work had been done.

I saw at once that if I could only prevail upon Normia to trust herself to me, the position of things would give me the very chance of chances to help her to escape. Anyone could

reach the gallery from the outside with the greatest ease, and Normia herself could get away by the same means.

I was chuckling over the discovery when the folding-doors which I reckoned led to Normia's apartments opened, and a maid-servant came out. She was so surprised at seeing me that she held the doors open long enough for me to see into the ante-room which was beyond them.

I was desperately busy measuring something, and making notes in a little book, and took no notice of her for a moment. Then I gave a little start, as if I had just seen her, and guessing by her looks and dress that she was French, bade her good-day in her own language.

It turned out to be a good guess. Her face brightened instantly.

"Good-day, monsieur. I thought all the men had gone," she said.

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders and gestured.

"Ah! the rascals have an easy time of it, mademoiselle, but we foremen have to work much longer. The work must be measured up, you know," and I continued to fool about with the rule.

"How did you know I was French, monsieur?"

"How do we tell a garden rose from a mere briar blossom, mademoiselle? Culture tells. Vienna is not Paris."

"That is pretty. I have not seen you before."

"My loss, that," said I, with a smirk. "Had I known what a pretty face was here you would have seen me, I warrant you."

She tossed her head coquettishly.

"Would you measure me up as well as the work?" she asked with a smile.

"We have no tape short enough to measure dainty waists like yours, and no plumbs long enough to reach the bottom of such deep eyes," I replied, seeing that I could safely lay it on solidly.

"Monsieur! What a flatterer!"

"No, no; nothing but a bachelor with a passion for the truth," I said, making her an elaborate bow. "But I recognise beauty when I see it."

She closed the door and came toward me.

"You are more polite than your men, you know."

"The work has to be done quickly, so I sent only women haters. I wanted their eyes on the work—not on you, little one."

She showed her teeth in a laugh of pleasure, and starting back, I put my hand to my eyes, as if dazzled.

"Don't!" I cried.

"Don't what?"

"Don't show those lovely teeth. I am a connoisseur of pearls."

"Monsieur! But you are ridiculous! Tell me, when will the work be finished?"

"Never, if I had to do it, and you were to be in and out here. But it ought to be finished by the time agreed."

"There's a lot to do yet."

"Not to this window. But there are the others."

"Are they all to be done? Then you will often be here?" And she laughed again, and made eyes at me, very slily.

I accepted the implied invitation, and replied that there were spots outside which were better meeting places than the gallery.

"But I am not allowed ever to go out, monsieur," she said, making a grimace.

"Cannot the Princess spare you?" And I nodded my head in the direction of the folding-doors.

"Ah, she—yes; but the Baroness—no. The 'Dragoness,' we call her." This was pretty significant. I answered in the same vein, and we continued a flirtatious chat for some minutes until she asked me at what hour I should return on the following day.

"The evening would suit me best," I said, with a glance at the ladder as a convenient means of entrance.

But she shook her head vigorously.

"No, no, no. Not to-morrow evening. I cannot then. Don't come then on any account. No, no." Her exaggerated gestures struck me as singular, but I named the same time in the afternoon.

"Yes," she agreed readily, and more at ease. Then, as if to please me, she added: "And the following day in the evening, if you like," and slipped away, turning to kiss her hand to me.

I attached no particular importance to the incident at the moment, and as soon as she

had disappeared I opened the folding-doors and went into the ante-room beyond. It was empty, and again there was a choice of doors to perplex me.

I stood for a second or two in hesitation, and then took my chance at the nearest. I knocked, and then opened it with as much confidence as I could assume.

It was a very bad shot. The door led into a dressing-room with a bedroom beyond, and I was closing it in some confusion when a curtained door farther on opened, and Normia came out and caught me in the act.

"M. Provost!" she exclaimed, in surprise and manifest indignation.

For the moment I was dumbfounded, and could not find a word to reply.

I shut the door hastily and bowed to her, looking, no doubt, to the full as confused as I felt to be caught in this way disguised and apparently plying my vocation of spy in her apartments.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOUBLE TREACHERY.

My confusion at being surprised by Normia in this very equivocal situation was quickly followed by a feeling of intense exasperation. Eager to help her, I seemed fated to take no step which did not compromise me further in her eyes.

I was highly wrought by the events of the day, and by the knowledge that I was within a few hours of the time when this miserable personation would end, and I had a vague feeling that she ought to be able to see through the wall of misrepresentation that hedged me and recognise my purpose toward her.

It was utterly unreasonable of me, I know. The evidence of my scoundrelism was convincing, and all my actions appeared to confirm it; but my nerves were out of tone, and her persistent disbelief irritated me.

I began to blame her for that which was Fortune's doing, and I found some difficulty in keeping my rising temper in check.

"I am not surprised you are silent, monsieur," she said after a pause, "You are less adroit than usual in your work, seeing that I have caught you."

"It looks like it to you, no doubt. But, as a matter of fact, I was seeking you, and, not

having been here before, I made a mistake," I replied testily.

"Never before?" she repeated, with a curl of the lip. "Your memory fails you, monsieur." An unpleasant way of being told I was not speaking the truth. Provost had obviously been there often enough—to Catarina, no doubt. "And why this disguise?"

"I slipped on this workman's blouse to mislead your servants. I did not wish the Baroness to know of my visit."

She took this for another falsehood, and I began to kick hard against the pricks.

"I know appearances are against me," I said a little doggedly, "and I have no time now to change them. I am not here to spy on you, but to warn you that there is a scheme on foot to hand you over to your enemies in Servia."

"Very ingenious, monsieur, but superfluous," she replied in a tone of ice. "I have already had warning. More precise than yours, too, for the name of *one* of the principals was given to me." Her look said plainly that she meant me.

I began to get out of hand.

"I see it is no use to attempt to remove your prejudice," I declared, more doggedly than before.

"Ah! you understand me, I see. Do you deny that you have been in league with others for this very purpose? That you have had meetings to discuss it, and that you brought information concerning it from Belgrade?"

"Of what use is it to deny anything to you? You take the worst view of every

action and word of mine," I cried; and then I let myself go. "You condemn me first and sneer at me afterwards. You hold me for a rogue and every word I utter for a falsehood. If I were to tell you that I attended the meetings in order to get knowledge to enable me to frustrate the attempt, you would not believe me. If I tell you that this story has now been brought to you to blacken me still further in your opinion, while at the same time lulling your suspicions so that the real attempt may succeed, you will hold me no higher than a hypocrite. Let it pass at that! Persist in believing that I seek only your ruin, and when you find my warning true and the other false, you will at least have the consolation of having acted consistently, even at the cost of disaster. I apologise for having thus tried to warn you!" And with that I bowed and turned on my heel.

"M. Provost!"

"Your Highness?" I had reached the door and paused.

"Do not go like that."

"And why not, I beg you? I have assured you more than once that I have no object but to help and serve you. I know the risks and dangers you are running. I know you have enemies and spies all about you. I come to warn you, and, if possible, to plan your escape from all this; and your reply, shown in words, looks, manner, everything, is that you hold me for a paltry rogue unworthy of belief and worthy of nothing but scorn and contempt. When you can judge me less unfairly I will return—if it be not too late, indeed."

"'I AM THE FOREMAN EXCELLENCY.'"

(*Page 207.*)

To my surprise she fell into a seat near, and covered her face, apparently in great agitation. My stupid anger passed on the instant, and I paused in some confusion. Presently she looked up.

"Have I indeed wronged you? Heaven knows I can ill afford to alienate a friend. But when I learnt this——"

"How did you learn it?" I broke in.

"The Baroness told me." Her tone was so changed that it appeared as if my outburst of temper had done more to persuade her of my sincerity than all my former protestations.

"Did she tell you also that it was I who had warned her? Why, the——" I stopped abruptly as the door from the gallery was opened, and we heard Stephanie's voice, speaking in a tone of anger and suspicion.

"The foreman, you say? Where is he?"

"He is there with the Princess now, Excellency," answered the maid, who saw us at that moment and pointed to me.

I kept my back to Stephanie. She had better hear my voice before seeing my face, as I did not want to have a scene before the maid.

"I will see that your Highness's wishes are carried out by my men," I said to Normia with a low bow. Then I turned to Stephanie and bowed to her. "I am the foreman, Excellency."

I rather enjoyed the anger that blazed from her eyes as she returned my look, and for a moment I thought she would break out into a tirade. But she restrained her temper.

"Oh, yes, I remember now; you were to

be here this afternoon. As you have finished with the Princess, come with me and I will give you your instructions," and she went to the door again. "I'll see your Highness when I have finished with this man," she added to Normia.

It was a clever move, for I was either compelled to follow her or make a scene before the servant. I chose the former and went out with her.

"Shall we discuss it here, Excellency?" I asked with a grin as we went through the gallery. "By the way, I'd better leave the owner his blouse," and I threw it off.

I think she was too furious to reply, and nothing more was said until we reached her own rooms. She was white with passion.

"You will explain, I suppose?"

"Of course. Am I not your slave, great Empress, your bondsman, your thing, to be ordered here, driven there, and bound under penalty of the lash to explain every act and thought of my life?" And I laughed and threw myself into a chair.

"Have I not the right to demand an explanation?"

"You are in a furious passion, Stephanie. I wish you would let yourself go for a few minutes. It would relieve you, and I don't mind."

Somewhat to my consternation she took me at my word, but not in the sense I had meant. She sat staring at me a moment, every muscle tense and set, and then, throwing up her hands, she burst into a tempest of tearless sobbing—

great choking sobs, which convulsed and ultimately exhausted her, until she flung her arms wide on the table and laid her head on them, trembling and moaning. My dislike of her amounted almost to hatred, but I could not witness this unmoved.

"Come, Stephanie," I said, going to her. But she waved me away vehemently. It was some time before she regained her self-command, and it was when she raised her head that I saw, to my amazement, her eyes were dry. She had not shed a single tear!

"I went to Normia to warn her of the scheme to hand her over to the Servian Government," I said as soon as I thought she could listen; "and I was in that workman's blouse in order to escape the vigilance of the servants."

She received this explanation in silence.

"Had I not better come another time?" I asked presently.

"No. I am myself now. But your sneers are hard to bear, Guy. You don't seem to know how hard. I am ashamed of my weakness. I keep that generally for the night time. I am a fool to let you know your power." I did not reply, and she added: "You need not have warned her. I had done that already."

"You told her I was concerned in it, too," I reminded her.

"I wished to set her against you—that's why. If she had not come between us you would——" She broke off, and then, with a deep sigh, added: "Ah, Guy, you are as hard to me as if this love of mine for you were a crime."

"Let us look the facts in the face, Stephanie. I can have no love for you. You have forced this engagement as you would force the marriage. One cannot love the hand that holds the scourge."

"I will force you to love me yet."

"More probably you will find the whip struck from your hand," I retorted.

"What do you mean by that?" she cried, quickly and eagerly.

"There are but two alternatives for the slave—death or emancipation."

The words appeared to create a much deeper effect than I had anticipated. She sat thinking.

"You little guess the result of those words, or you would not have spoken them," she cried angrily. Then, reading the questioning look in my eyes, she bit her lips, as if regretting the speech, and added: "I mean that our marriage must take place to-morrow."

It struck me that this was a rapidly vamped explanation to cover a meaning she feared I might attach to her words.

"No; you fixed a week, and to that we will keep," I answered firmly.

"You think you can venture to refuse?"

"I am sure. You may do what you will."

"As you will, then. One would think it was your death instead of your marriage," she said with a bitter laugh. She gave in so readily that my former impression was strengthened.

I rose.

"There are two things I have to say. I

have heard that that plot against Normia is to be carried out soon."

"Normia again! Always Normia!" she snapped almost viciously. "But you need not lacerate your tender heart on her account."

"Is not her safety everything to your cause? I don't understand you," I said.

"There is nothing to understand, except that if such an attempt were made it would fail. Did not you see that I was taking extra precautions?"

"The other thing I wish to say is that—I am no assassin. The Prince would have me fight and kill von Epstein. You know the truth, and that I will have no hand in it."

"You do not believe that I would dream of such a thing!" she cried indignantly. "I have already told the Prince."

"For that I thank you, at any rate. The reputation for one murder is more than enough without the actual commission of another;" and then I left.

I had been impressed by her manner. What was that decision to which she declared I had driven her, and which I was to regret so bitterly? Could she have some other infernal bombshell to explode at my feet? I was always suspicious of her, and now more so than ever. And then something occurred to give shape and form to my thoughts.

I was leaving the house when a man, whistling carelessly, ran up the steps and nearly cannoned into me. He smiled and murmured an apology, and passed in. His face was familiar, and yet for the moment I could not

place it. And I had gone some way along the street, when, in the midst of other thoughts, his name flashed into my mind.

He was the man whom my companion at the "Halbermond" on the night of Provost's death, young von Gartner, had pointed out to me as Count von Kassler, of the Ministry of the Interior, and high in the Minister's confidence.

He had shaved his beard since that night, but the high-bridged, aquiline nose, the ruddy complexion, the deep-set, keen blue eyes, and the general carriage, made me certain of him. What could such a man be doing at the Black House?

The question was so important that it sent me hurrying back to make sure.

I examined the register of callers, but there was no such name as his.

"Has Herr Prestvo called for me within the last hour?" I asked the man in charge of the arrangements, taking a name at random.

"No, sir."

"Strange. He was to have called. Can he have been without your knowing?" And I gave a pretty accurate description of the count.

"The only caller answering that description is this gentleman," and he pointed to this entry:

"Lieutenant Unterling, to see Baroness Dolgoroff. By appointment."

"That's a long way from Prestvo," I laughed.

"He came in as you went out, sir."

"Oh, that's not the man. Well, when he comes, say he had better come round to my

rooms." And I went home to try and puzzle the thing out.

What was the meaning of that assumed name? He wasn't in the plot—that was certain. He had a career, and would not sacrifice it for such a scheme.

If not that, however, what? A spy? I dismissed that as equally impossible. A man as high up as he was would not act as a mere spy.

"To see Baroness Dolgoroff; by appointment." If a spy, then he must have won Stephanie's confidence as well as that of his chief. And at that, my thoughts took a shape which literally chilled me with the shock of surprise.

What if he *had* the confidence of both, that there was some secret understanding between them, and that he was the intermediary?

For such a purpose he was the very man to be chosen. He was so little known that he ran comparatively no risk of being identified by the frequenters of the Black House. Men of many nationalities went there; and although secret investigation was always made about them, it was Stephanie who directed it. It would be the easiest thing for her to vouch "Lieutenant Unterling" and, once accredited, no questions would be asked.

Assuming, then, that he was the intermediary, what did it mean? The problem gave me hours of anxious consideration that evening.

I recalled what my old chief had said of the late Baron—that of all the schemes and plots in which he had been concerned, he had

invariably emerged with profit and safety, whoever else had been ruined. Stephanie had learnt her ethics of diplomacy from him, and was certainly not too scrupulous to build a bridge of any sort across which she could walk in safety when this scheme ended, as it inevitably would end, in ruin.

Count Kassler's master would certainly be willing to pay a big price as well as guarantee Stephanie's safety in return for her help in keeping him accurately informed of all that was being done. And such a betrayal was just one which would have delighted the subtle heart of the disreputable old tactician, the late Baron.

Then other questions came up and clamoured for an answer. Why had Stephanie resolved to take the risk of breaking with von Epstein? She had told me that she set our betrothal before even the cause itself. But I knew her better than to think she would set any personal feelings before her own advantage. There was some other reason somewhere, if I could but guess it.

Those alterations in the gallery leading to Normia's apartments? Could they have any relation to this? Apparently designed to strengthen the defences of the place, in their present state they had weakened it by making it possible for anyone to gain access to the apartments.

Alexandrov's statement that Grundelhof had found other help—was that another item of this weird mosaic of double-leading? Could they have made terms with her to betray

Normia? I reviewed all the incidents of the afternoon, and thought of that decision to which she said I had driven her, and should regret. Was this more of the pattern of treachery?

There was indeed but one consideration which would reconcile all these points—that Stephanie had planned a wholesale betrayal of all who trusted her.

If she had made terms with the Austrian Minister, and together they had decided that the time had come for a final blow to be struck, her conduct was clear. The reason for von Kassler's visit was plain; she could laugh at von Epstein, for she was assured of safety and reward; the marriage with me could take place at any time; while for her to hand Normia over to the Servian Government a little in advance of the end would both bring her extra profit and appease her jealousy.

And added to this maelstrom of conflicting doubts and speculations about Stephanie were all the agitating hopes and fears about my own position, raised by the discovery of Provost's murderer and by my interview with Catarina.

Would the next day see the fellow's arrest, and set me free to act? It was more urgent now than ever in view of these new complications. I longed for it, and all that it meant to Normia and me, more passionately than ever a newly-made slave prayed for freedom.

CHAPTER XIX.

FACE TO FACE WITH PROVOST'S MURDERER.

THE next day was the most trying and anxious I had experienced since the black week that followed Provost's murder. No news came from Catarina of Dromach's return ; and every hour of the day I was on the rack of intolerable suspense.

I passed the time between my rooms and the Black House, and more than once during the day I took an opportunity of observing from the outside the repairs to the gallery windows. I was glad to observe that the work progressed very slowly, for I had a plan at the back of my head to get Normia to attempt an escape with my help while the repairs were in progress. And I hoped to find a chance of discussing it with her during the reception.

But it was evident, from the moment of my entrance, that Stephanie was not going to let me speak to Normia.

Stephanie herself was in the highest spirits, laughing and chatting brightly with all about her, and she kept me by her side while numbers of people came up to offer congratulations upon the betrothal.

I bowed and smirked and murmured such commonplaces as occurred to me in reply, while

keeping my eyes about me. And I saw that Normia was not present.

"There will not be many dances, Guy," whispered Stephanie as we stood alone once, "but I have fixed the Cotillon for midnight. And of course you'll be my partner for that. It is *the* ceremonious announcement of the event."

"Just as you please," I agreed. It was all one to me. The thing was no more than a farce, but I could not yet show my hand and tell her so.

"Don't you forget that. Exactly as the clock strikes twelve we are to head the procession round the rooms."

"I shan't forget. I'm here for the very thing. Is Normia coming?"

She frowned, and then smiled.

"Is that to make me jealous? She did not wish to come, but the Prince told her she must come in at least for the Cotillon. She will be here just before. She and the Prince will follow immediately behind us in the procession. We take precedence for this one occasion, Guy," and she laughed.

A little later the Baron von Epstein came up, and in a surly fashion muttered something about congratulations. I bore the man no ill-will. I wished, indeed, with all my heart that I had been congratulating him, and I tried to put some heartiness into the few words I spoke to him.

But he favoured me with an ugly scowl in return, and was walking off, when, somewhat to my surprise, Stephanie called him back, slipped

her hand on his arm, and went down the room, speaking earnestly and confidentially to him.

I wasn't sorry. It relieved me from standing to be stared at, and, just as I was moving off, Prince Lepova engaged me in conversation, and strolled with me through the crowded rooms to a large palm house at one end.

He had just mentioned Normia's name when he appeared to remember something suddenly and excused himself, saying he would return in a few moments to resume the subject.

I was quite willing to wait. One place suited me just as well as another, and being anxious to hear what he had to say about Normia, I sat down very contentedly until he should return.

I had been alone some three or four minutes when I had a very unpleasant surprise. I heard a smothered cry in a woman's voice, and the guttural accents of a man in passion; then the rustling of silk draperies, and Stephanie came rushing through the place, followed by von Epstein.

She gave a start of glad surprise as I jumped to my feet, and hurried to me.

"Thank heaven you are here, Gerard. This man has grossly insulted me!" And she fell into a seat, trembling violently and deathly pale, while von Epstein stood by glaring defiance at me.

I understood then why the Prince had steered me into the palm house. The thing had been arranged between them to force me into this quarrel. And an exceedingly ugly

quarrel it would prove if I did not keep a very level head.

"I will speak to you later, Herr Baron," I said coolly.

"I shall await you in the card room, monsieur. I trust you will not forget to come." And with a sneer and an elaborate bow he took himself off.

As I knew that Stephanie was only acting, I waited quietly until she chose to recover. Then, with many over-acted regrets for having embroiled me in the quarrel, she gave me a rambling account of how he had tried to get her to break off the betrothal, and had then kissed her.

I said very little to her, and having taken her back to the salon, I went off to try and come to an understanding with the infuriated Baron.

Unfortunately, he was not alone in the room, and I guessed he had collected one or two friends to see him make an example of me.

"Oh! you have shown up, then?" he sneered as I entered.

I let the sneer pass, and, crossing to him, said, very quietly:

"Will you give me a few minutes in private, Herr Baron?"

"No, I won't," he replied, in as offensive a tone as he could use. "If you wish to admit your cowardice, do it openly."

This was not easy to take, but I smothered my temper and answered in the same even tone.

"I think I can convince you that there is

no reason for us to quarrel." Then to the other men: "Gentlemen, will you oblige me by leaving me with the Baron for a few moments?"

"He's not master of the house yet, so you need not take your orders from him," declared von Epstein. And they shrugged their shoulders and remained.

"There is a lady's name involved in this, gentlemen, and I——"

"Oh, no, there isn't," he burst in. "It's a question of nationality—yours. I'm curious to know whether you're a Frenchman or an Englishman. Which country had the misfortune of spawning you?"

"I am an Englishman, but my nationality has nothing to do with this."

"I say it has. Do you give me the lie?"

"Do, for heaven's sake, wait before you rush into the thing like this. Look here; if you're bent on forcing a quarrel, you shall do it. All I ask is that you take time to grow cooler, and then have ten minutes' talk with me. If I don't show you there is no need for anything of this, you shall have your way."

As I was speaking, Prince Lepova and one or two others entered, and stood round the door.

Von Epstein listened to me with a sneer and then laughed.

"You want time to make a bolt of it, eh?" he cried truculently, glancing at the newcomers and raising his voice. "I know you English. The whole lot of you are nothing but dirty cowards and liars, from your fat King down, the cursed drunken——"

"Stop!" I cried, furiously. "Gentlemen, you have heard what has fallen from this man's lips. They are the lips of a liar!" And I struck him a back-handed blow on the mouth.

Prince Lepova crossed hurriedly to me.

"What is this, M. Provost?"

"Your scheme has succeeded through this hot-headed idiot's temper. You had better arrange matters on my behalf," and away I went, paying no heed to either his words or looks of protest. I regretted the incident bitterly. The fool had been duped, and being no longer of use had been turned over to me in the hope that I would kill him. And he had played right into their hands through his furious temper and unforgivable scurrility.

As I crossed the salon, Stephanie met me.

"I hope nothing has happened, Guy?"

"Can't we afford the simple luxury of truth? Your plan has succeeded so far. He insulted me, I struck him, and he'll probably try to kill me to-morrow morning."

"He insulted me, Guy!" she cried fiercely.

"And your treatment of him—what is that, pray?"

"You will kill him, Guy?" she whispered, strenuously.

"I shan't even try. He is much more likely to kill me."

"You must—you must! He is dangerous. He will ruin us all."

"I am no bravo, to cut throats at your bidding or Lepova's," I answered, sternly. "And now I am going out on the balcony to cool down."

"You won't forget the Cotillon?" she said as I was moving off.

"Curse the Cotillon. I'm in no mood to go jigging about the room like a prancing ape."

"But, Guy, you must," she said, eagerly. "On the stroke of midnight, remember."

"All right. Another scene of the comedy may be a relief." And I walked off.

I went to the spot where I had sat once before and lit a cigar. I glanced at my watch, and saw I had half an hour before the jigging business, and I was soon absorbed in thoughts that were none too pleasant.

I was not afraid of the meeting with von Epstein. The discipline of the last few days in schooling myself to face the certainty of death rendered me virtually indifferent whether I fell or not. I had one great regret—that I had to meet the man, not in my own name, but in the detestable character of Provost. A little luck, and we should have had that slippery Greek in our hands, and then I could have fought in my own name.

But it was no good to rail against luck, so I accepted the situation for what it was. One thing was certain, of course—I was not going to murder von Epstein to oblige Stephanie.

Very soon Lepova came out and told me the arrangements he had made: the place and time of the meeting, and that we were to fight with pistols. He said I had been very prudent to force the other man to be the challenger and so get the choice of weapons, as von

Epstein was a seasoned duellist and an exceptionally fine swordsman.

He was enlarging upon this, and I was paying little attention to him, when I gave a start on noticing something in the road below. My seat was at the extreme left of the house at the back, and it gave a view along a secluded, tree-shaded road, unlighted save for one lamp.

I saw a man leave the house by a side door and hurry along the road. As he passed under the lamp he paused, looked at his watch, and started to run. I had a good view of him as he stood under the light. His tall, angular figure with its stoop of the shoulders and forward hang of the head showed up clearly, and he carried one arm in a sling. It was Grundelhof.

What was he doing in such a spot and at such an hour—close to midnight? I gave another start at the thought. Midnight was the hour for the Cotillon—the hour when Stephanie had insisted so strenuously upon my being in the salon. Was it no more than coincidence?

I lost no time in getting rid of Lepova and sat waiting and thinking. All my suspicions of the previous night revived. Some devilment was in the making.

Two or three minutes later I had what looked like confirmation. An electric motor-car without lights came stealing silently past the house and stopped under the shadow of some trees, just beyond the wing of the house in which Normia's apartments were situated.

I waited for no more. I made my way

through the crowded rooms to the entrance to Normia's apartments. The guard was there.

"Has the Princess gone to the ball-room yet?" I asked him casually.

"No, sir." The answer confirmed my suspicions.

For a second I hesitated whether I would force my way past him into the gallery, but a better plan suggested itself.

I ran downstairs, got my cloak from the attendant—a long, black cloak of Provost's which I had worn, having no overcoat of my own—and, as if in no hurry, lit a cigarette on the doorstep and sauntered out.

Keeping well in the shadow of the building, I stole quickly round to the spot where the alterations to the gallery were being made. The ladder was in position, and a plank, which had been roped to it to prevent its use, had been removed. One of the casements was out of position, too, and the opening was covered with a piece of sacking.

The thing was now as plain as print. Stephanie had taken a hand in the abduction and had contrived this very cunning plan by which the man—Alexandrov, of course—could get access to Normia's rooms while the merry-making in the other part of the house was keeping everybody else busy.

The night was as dark as they could have wished, but it favoured me as much as the others, and in a moment I was at the top of the ladder, listening at the opening for any sound of movements in the gallery.

The place was dead still, and not greatly

caring whether I was seen or not, I pushed the canvas aside and slipped in. There was no one there. My knowledge of the gallery enabled me to move warily; but in creeping up to the folding-doors which led to Normia's rooms I ran against a column with a bust on it, and made a little noise.

It was covered with a white cloth, and I had this in my hands when one of the doors was opened and a light showed. Instantly I flung the cloth over my head and stood as still as one of the statues.

"I heard nothing, monsieur." It was the voice of the little French servant.

"Well, be quick, then," was the reply, in the liquid voice of Alexandrov. I recognised it at once.

The movement of the light, seen through the cloth, allowed of my following their actions. They came close to the folding-doors by which I was posing. The doors were opened, and the lights from within came streaming full on to me, much to my uneasiness.

Then the girl spoke.

"The Princess will be quite ready now, monsieur. She has been dressed some time in readiness to go to the salon just before midnight. Wait here, please, until I bring her out."

"Be quick—be quick! There is not a moment to lose," was Alexandrov's impatient reply, and I heard the girl go into the anteroom.

Alexandrov was so close to me that I could hear his breathing, and I half feared he would

hear the thumping of my heart against my ribs in my excitement.

He shifted his feet now and again, restlessly; and just after the girl shut the door of Normia's room beyond, I heard him start and swear softly to himself. His shadow came suddenly between me and the light, and I made sure that he suspected me.

I knew that his knife between my ribs would be his first indication that he had discovered I was no statue, so I lowered the white cloth and looked at him.

He had not seen me, however. He was bending down with his back to me, and his oath had been evoked by some difficulty he was experiencing in unfolding a long black cloak. To see what the trouble was he had stepped forward into the light.

I would not again run the risk of covering my eyes, but held the white cloth so that my face just appeared above it, and stared at him intently.

I did not then realise the uncanny effect of my action, but it was soon apparent. He got the cloak arranged to his liking, and moved back into the shadow to wait. A second later, unable to hold my breath any longer, I let it escape in a long, deep, and somewhat tremulous sigh.

He heard it, started nervously, glanced round him in search of the cause, and then, fixed upon him with a stolid stare above the white sheet, he saw my eyes, reflecting no doubt with a sort of unearthly gleam the light from the room beyond.

All this time I had not seen his face, but I could tell that he was fascinated with sudden terror. After a few seconds a suppressed groan came from him, and down he went on to his knees, and began muttering his prayers as fast as his chattering teeth could get them out.

He regarded me as a ghostly visitor from the other world, and, well content to frighten him away and so avoid other trouble, I stretched out my right hand slowly and began to glide towards him.

It was my turn then to be amazed.

As I moved toward him, he uttered another gasping cry and wriggled forward on his knees, his hands held aloft beseechingly, until the fear-sweat on his pallid face glistened in the light.

"Mercy! Mercy!" he moaned. "I will confess. I will confess. Spare me."

I recognised him the instant I saw his face. And at the recognition many things were made plain.

He was the man I had met outside my rooms on the night of Provost's murder. His fright then, and his abject terror now, were alike explained. They sprang from the same cause.

He himself was Provost's murderer, and his tale to Catarina about Dromach was no more than a lie to win her favour and lull her suspicions. He might well identify the knife with which the deed had been done. It was his own!

The truth was out at last, thank heaven, and I was really a free man again.

CHAPTER XX.

BARON VON EPSTEIN.

No sooner had I made the discovery that Alexandrov was the man who of all others I wished to find than the difficulties of the situation occurred to me. He was a big, powerful brute, and was sure to be armed with knife or revolver, or both, while I had no weapon at all.

The moment he realised that I was of the earth and not from the region to which he believed he had sent me, he would fight desperately. The odds were too heavy for me to have a chance of success, despite the fact that he was for the moment paralysed with fear and that I should have the advantage of surprise.

On the other hand, if I could drive him away while he still believed that I was my own ghost his courage and confidence would return with the daylight, and there would be little difficulty in getting him arrested.

It is always safe to play on a low-born Greek's fear of the supernatural; and I decided to try it now, leaving the struggle to come afterwards if it must.

It had not taken half a dozen seconds for these thoughts to pass through my mind, and all the time I had kept my eyes steadily on his face.

I now sunk my voice to its most sepulchral tone, and moaned, very slowly and deliberately:

"You killed me, Alexandrov. Confess, or never more shalt thou know peace."

He threw his hands on high in a very paroxysm of fright.

"I do confess! I killed you! Oh, Mother of Heaven, have mercy!" And, as if unable to bear the sight of the apparition, he buried his head in his hands.

I seized the chance to step back into the black shadow, leaving the beam of light between us, and threw off the white sheet. In my black cloak I was practically invisible, of course.

"Go!" I thundered out of the darkness. "And, remember!" And I let my voice die away, as if I were vanishing.

The illusion was apparently a complete success. He looked up, wiped the sweat from his brow, and rose, staring about him, and staggering and reeling like a drunken man. At that moment the door of Normia's room beyond was opened.

"Go!" I wailed again faintly; and in a yet fainter whisper, "Go!"

He needed no more. With a cry of fear he made headlong for the window, upsetting more than one thing in his rush, and scrambled out just before Normia and the girl showed in the doorway.

"What was that noise? Why is the gallery in darkness, Elise?" asked Normia.

"Someone must have switched off the

lights, your Highness," answered the ready-witted girl, glancing about her in great bewilderment.

"Switch them up at once."

At that I threw off my cloak, and stepped forward as the lights went up.

The maid gave a little scream.

"The foreman!" she cried.

Normia was no less surprised.

"M. Provost!"

"I have a strange story to tell you, Princess, and you should know it at once."

The servant began to take alarm.

"It is the hour for the Cotillon, your Highness," she said hurriedly.

"Enough," I said, turning on her sharply. "I know the part you have played to-night. I was here all the time."

"I don't know what you mean, monsieur; but I will fetch the Baroness"; and off she sped along the gallery.

"What does this mean, monsieur?" asked Normia, in some alarm.

"That the attempt of which I warned you was made to-night, and fortunately I reached here in time to prevent it."

One of the big clocks in the neighbourhood chimed midnight, and Stephanie came hurrying in with the maid. She had evidently been close at hand, waiting to learn the issue of the attempt.

"But I was dressed for the ball, monsieur, and Elise came to fetch me," said Normia.

"Elise had left a man standing in the

shadow of that door, and she knew that he was here to carry you away."

"Oh, monsieur! monsieur! How false! How dare you!" cried the girl, indignantly. She had overheard this. "Excellency, you will not have my character taken away like this by a man who came here as a spy."

I picked up the long black cloak and a gag which Alexandrov had dropped in his flight.

"These things tell their own story," I said quietly.

At this Stephanie thought she saw her chance.

"You would naturally know where to look for them if you had placed them there," she said drily.

"Or if I had seen them dropped by the man in his flight," I retorted. "There is some plain speaking to come. Had this girl better remain to hear it?" I asked Stephanie. "I don't propose to deal harshly with her. She is, of course, no more than the tool."

Stephanie turned on the girl with a great show of indignation.

"If you have had a hand in this you shall answer for it. You had better go for the time."

"She will go for good, and the sooner the better," I declared.

"Have you any other orders?" snapped Stephanie angrily.

"Let her remain, then, and send for Prince Lepova. He at least will understand what should be done." And at that the girl was sent off.

"I had warned you of this, Normia," said Stephanie, "and you will, therefore, understand why it is that M. Provost is here so opportunely."

I laughed.

"Why not my Christian name, Stephanie?"

She declined the challenge.

"Are you coming to the salon, Normia?"

"What occurred was this," I interposed. "My suspicions were aroused by something I saw as I sat on the balcony. I hastened here, entering by that window—as someone had entered before me. I was in time to see Elise and a man, whom I can recognise, and she left him here while she went to decoy you. While she was away the fellow was suddenly stricken with panic—at least, so I presume; and he rushed away, leaving these things behind him."

I thought it best to say nothing about my share in scaring Alexandrov, and Stephanie promptly detected the weak spot.

"A probable story, indeed!" she scoffed. "But intelligible enough if you add the key—that you were here to see the scheme carried through."

But at this Normia astonished us both.

"I believe what M. Provost has told me, madame, and I thank you, monsieur, from my heart for your service. I am sorry I ever doubted you."

"Thank you," I replied, more moved than I cared for either of them to see.

Stephanie was bitterly angry, but before anything else could be said Lepova came hurrying through the gallery.

"Baroness! M. Provost!" he exclaimed in great surprise. "I came to see why you were so late, Normia. Are you not coming? Everyone is agape with curiosity at the delay."

"There has been trouble here, and nearly very serious trouble, too, Prince," I said, and told him briefly what had occurred. I was sure that he had had no hand in the affair and could be trusted to take drastic measures now that he knew.

"I am in no mood for the Cotillon," I added.

"They will say that the Baron has frightened you away by his challenge, monsieur," he replied.

"Challenge?" cried Normia, with a start.

"Baron von Epstein has insulted M. Provost's real country—England—most grossly, and they are to meet in the morning," said the Prince placidly.

Normia changed colour and bit her lip, and to distract attention from her, I gave my arm to Stephanie. "They shall not say that, Prince. Let us return to the salon at once."

I was so elated by the turn events had taken, my discovery about Alexandrov, the thrill of coming freedom from the cursed bondage of the last few days, and the words of confidence which Normia had spoken, that I paid little heed to Stephanie except to notice that she was excited and agitated.

Her moods were nothing to me. A few hours would see her power over me broken, and whether she were angry or pleased did not concern me now a scrap.

We passed through the long gallery in silence; but when we stood outside the door of the ball room she halted.

"I must speak, Guy," she said impetuously.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, don't use that jeering, indifferent tone to me. It maddens me," she cried, seizing my arm.

"Haven't I told you over and over again that I choose to play this thing out as a comedy? Don't be so strenuous."

"Can't you see that I am almost beside myself with fear—fear for you?"

"I can understand your being a bit wild at things not going as you planned," I replied in the same indifferent tone. "But you did your worst. You've that consolation."

She closed her eyes and clenched her hands in passion.

"Do you mean to do as you told me before in the ball room about von Epstein? Tell me. Tell me."

"What did I say?"

"Oh, Guy, you madden me! Do you mean that you will let that brute kill you tomorrow in the duel without trying to shoot him?"

"I'll plough my own furrow, thank you."

"Tell me. I insist. You shall tell me," she cried passionately.

I looked at her coldly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because your life is in danger, and I can't bear it. I cannot. I cannot."

"A little belated, that remorse, isn't it?" I sneered.

She winced at the taunt. For a moment she stared at me as if she herself could have saved von Epstein the trouble of killing me. Then, with one of those sudden changes so frequent with her, she made a great effort and recovered sufficient self-possession to answer calmly.

"Then you shall not meet him. I will find the means"; and she put her hand upon my arm and moved on toward the ball room.

"It is you who must explain now. How will you prevent it? What do you mean?"

She looked at me and smiled.

"If you will not protect yourself, I will protect you. I have not won you only to lose you again in such a way."

I returned her look searchingly, and seemed to read something of her purpose in her eyes.

"We shall see," I said, and with that we went on into the ball room.

We went through the farce of the dance, and at the close Stephanie and I stood together to receive the formal congratulations. But as soon as I could get away I left the house.

The Prince detained me a minute. He had had a full account from Normia, and thanked me warmly for my part. Then, referring to the morrow's meeting, he said he would call for me at seven o'clock to drive me to the ground.

"I trust you will serve me to-morrow as well as you have to-night, monsieur," were his parting words.

A cool reminder that he looked to me to turn assassin in order to help him play the hand which Stephanie had suddenly rendered

difficult by her promotion of myself to von Epstein's place in her favour.

I made no reply. I had plans of my own, indeed, in regard to the Baron. Stephanie's declaration—that she would protect me since I would not protect myself—could only bear one interpretation. She meant to take measures which would prevent him putting in an appearance on the following morning; and I was equally resolved to checkmate the attempt.

She had only to drop a word or two to such men as Hammerstein and Yuldoff that von Epstein was about to betray the scheme, and they would be ready to go to any length—murder, if need be—to silence him. And it must be my business to see that no harm came to him. If I were successful, my idea was that he would then be ready to listen to reason; and that we should be able to agree either to abandon the duel altogether, or to meet for the form of the thing, exchange harmless shots, and then go back to breakfast.

He was, however, a swaggering little blusterer. He had stopped on at the Black House after the quarrel between us, and had been strutting about the place as though the stupid wrangle had really added to his importance. And he was still strutting when I left.

As there was a good deal of commotion outside the house and plenty of carriages and servants round the door, it was not likely that any sort of attempt would be made there. Moreover, his house was only about half a mile distant, and as he would drive to it through the best-lighted and guarded streets in the capital,

I felt I could safely conclude that he would be allowed to reach home in safety.

I jumped into a cab, therefore, and drove to his house, resolved to wait for him there, and attempt to get the interview with him which he had before refused to grant.

I told the man who opened the door that the Baron was following me in a few minutes, and that I was to await his arrival.

I had not to wait long, and his face was a study when he thrust open the door and found me sitting in his armchair.

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" he demanded furiously. "How dare you force yourself into my house!"

"I wish to have a word or two with you in private. You refused my request before, and I have taken this means of gaining my end."

"Leave the house this instant, sir—this instant."

"I am quite aware that this is an unusual course, but——"

"I refuse to listen to a word from you. The affair is in the hands of our seconds, and I decline to speak to you."

"I have certain things to tell you——"

"If you do not go this instant, I shall call my servants and have you thrown out. This is monstrous. You have struck me."

I rose as if about to leave, and he threw the door wide open; but instead of going out, I shut the door and put my back to it. "Now you've got to listen, Baron, and you may as well do so without any more trouble."

He swore copiously and rushed across to the bell. "We'll soon see," he exclaimed.

"Don't you ring," I cried sternly. "If you do, I shall go straight to Baron Vodressy and tell him all about your relations with the Black House people."

His hand was already on the bell push; but he turned and looked at me. His eyes told me my threat had gone home. "This is infamous. Are you afraid to meet me in the morning? You spy!"

"Are you going to ring that bell, or listen to me quietly? Quick! Minutes are more precious than you think."

He turned away from the bell, shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and sneered.

"Say what you have to say, and go."

Satisfied that he was frightened enough to listen, I left my place at the door and went close to him.

"I have come to warn you to be on your guard. You are suspected of having betrayed, or being about to betray, all that you have learnt at the Black House and what has been going on there, and you know the people who have been your associates there sufficiently well to understand what they are likely to think of you in consequence."

He sneered again and waved his hand impatiently and contemptuously.

"If you had not been so hot-headed to-night in forcing that quarrel on me——"

"You struck me, sir!" he broke in fiercely, white and trembling with rage, and speaking between his clenched teeth.

"Not until I had tried every means to stop you from insulting me. That quarrel had all been carefully arranged, and I was just as much a dupe as you were. I was picked out because of my skill with the pistol, to meet and shoot you. I knew of it beforehand, and had refused to have anything to do with it. Then the opportunity was deliberately given to you to behave as you did to the Baroness Dolgoroff; I had meanwhile been placed where she would know how to rush to me; and in this way we were both embroiled in the quarrel. That is what I wished to explain to you, when you refused to give me a private interview."

"Very ingenious, considered as an attempt to get out of the fight. But"—he paused, and then, looking me straight in the eyes, he added deliberately: "I believe you are lying, sir."

It was hard to take this from the little beast, and I had a lot of difficulty in gulping down my rage.

"I've listened to you. Now go," he said curtly.

"I've only one more word to say. Since the quarrel I have learnt that steps are to be taken to prevent you from meeting me. What those steps are likely to be you can understand as well as I can. And it is to warn you that I have come now."

He laughed insolently.

"Still lying, I see," he sneered. "I don't believe a word of what you have said. You had better go, before I forget myself and return that blow you gave me."

"You little hot-headed fool!" I exclaimed,

losing control of my temper. "I am sorry I ever thought of warning you. Go your own fool's way, and be hanged to you!" And with that I swung round and flung the door open to leave the room.

The hall was in darkness, and as I hesitated a moment, not seeing the way to the front door, there came a loud crash of breaking glass at the rear of the house, followed by the upsetting of some article of furniture.

I turned to my companion. Our eyes met, and he realised then that there was ample need for my warning.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DUEL.

As soon as I jumped to the conclusion that the noise we had heard was caused by the blunder of someone who was breaking into Baron von Epstein's house, I drew him back into the room we had just left, and switched off the light.

"What are you doing?" he asked; and I judged by his tone that he was one of those men whose courage is pretty well tried by darkness.

"Someone is paying you a surprise visit, and we shall be prudent to have the advantage of the surprise. Ought that hall to have been in darkness? Are you sure of your servants?"

"I don't know. But switch up the light."

"If it's anyone from the Black House, the light won't stop them," I replied in a grim whisper. "Probably they know all about your habits; they are no fools, these men, although one of them bungled in getting into the house. What do you generally do at this time of night?"

"Smoke and read when at home, but——"

"There's no time to lose. Go and sit at that table where I saw the reading lamp, turn up that light, and be intent on your book. If you have a revolver, keep it handy, and if you have two, give me one."

"I have only one," he answered, his hesitating reply showing that he thought it would be safer not to trust me with one. "I'd rather call the servants."

"That's the shortest cut to death. They are probably in league with these men. But do as you like; only do it at once."

"Can I—can I trust you?"

I swore at him. I couldn't help it.

"You infernal idiot! Do you suppose that I should have come to warn you if you couldn't; or that if I were in this business, I shouldn't have knocked you on the head in the dark just now?"

This reasoning appeared to satisfy him. He crossed the room and turned up his reading lamp and opened a book. I looked round for some sort of weapon; and chose a heavy black ruler from his table. With this I stepped behind a curtain close to the door, from the shelter of which I could see what occurred and be able to take a hand when the need arose.

Von Epstein was exceedingly uncomfortable. He fidgeted in his chair, and as he lit his cigar I saw that his hand was shaking considerably.

Five or ten minutes passed in dead silence. I guessed that the men were waiting to make sure that the noise they had made had not roused anyone. The suspense tried the intended victim intensely. I saw him wipe the perspiration from his forehead more than once. It was a trying ordeal, of course, well calculated to test the nerves of anyone in his place.

Then a door was opened very cautiously, and von Epstein nearly let the book fall from his hands when he heard it.

I glued my eyes to the entrance. My fear was lest, without actually entering the room, they should attempt to shoot him where he sat. In such a case, if they succeeded, I should find myself in a pretty mess. We were known to have quarrelled, I had forced myself into his house, I should be found alone with him; and all this would be extremely difficult to explain away.

As these disquieting thoughts occurred to me, I began to regret the plan of defence I had formed on the spur of the moment. I had run my head into a noose that might be pulled by the hangman.

Not a sound indicated that anyone had come along the hall, and I gave an involuntary start of surprise when I saw a masked face thrust stealthily round the edge of the door. There was a pause for a breathless second or two, and then a revolver was slowly pointed at von Epstein's head.

The mess was to be as bad as my worst fears had anticipated, and the next instant would have made my conviction for murder a matter of certainty. But, fortunately for me, the baron's nerve gave out at that moment.

He had not heard the men, but he had heard the start I gave; and, mistaking this sound for that of their approach, he jumped up from his chair and called out:

"Who is there?"

For the next minute or so, matters were very

involved. Disconcerted by von Epstein's movement, his assailant fired at him and missed, and he and two companions rushed into the room.

The first of them—he who had fired the revolver—went down with a cracked skull from a blow of my weapon. The second got by me. I aimed a blow at the last man, but he ducked and avoided it. I grappled with him and with my hand on his throat he fell, taking me down with him; and we had a struggle on the floor until I choked the breath out of him and then put him out of action by bumping his head against the skirting boards.

When I rose, I found the third man had bolted at finding von Epstein's revolver pointed at his head.

"Perhaps you can see now that you were wrong to disbelieve me," I said as I got up, breathing hard from the effects of the struggle.

But now that the danger was over, von Epstein had quite recovered his nerve, and was inclined to minimise the risk he had run.

"Had you not been here I should have shot them," he replied; "but I was wrong to doubt your word."

"Well, that's some sort of concession, anyway. And perhaps you'll go a step further and believe what I told you about the cause of our quarrel to-night?"

"I will not discuss that," he answered curtly. "You struck me publicly. A man of my rank cannot take a blow, sir."

His tone and manner were to the full as angry as ever, and I looked at him in astonish-

ment. "Well, I've saved your life now," I retorted.

"This has nothing to do with our quarrel, M. Provost. It is true I am your debtor in this matter, but—you struck me, sir."

I could scarcely believe my own ears.

"Do you mean that you intend to try and take my life to-morrow morning—after this night's business?"

"You struck me, sir," he repeated doggedly.

"And serve you thundering well right," I all but blurted out. I meant it, but I made a last effort to avoid the silliness of a duel. "Well, anyway, you have seen that it was not cowardice which brought me here to-night. If you feel that a meeting is necessary to make good your position in the eyes of others, we can meet, of course. But I suggest that it shall be no more than a form, and that we agree now just to exchange shots, being careful not to hit each other."

"You have struck me, sir," he said again in the same dogged tone. "If you had not done that, I would have agreed; but nothing can wipe away the stain of that blow except a meeting;" and he made me a bow and then drew himself up and stared fixedly at me with an air of swagger which first drew a smile from me and then roused my anger.

"As you will; but this will make a great difference in matters to-morrow morning," and with that I turned on my heel and left the house.

I could not have believed that any man in his senses would have acted in such a way under the circumstances; and as I walked home,

I more than half regretted that I had intervened to save the little bloodthirsty fool. In my rage I felt that I should now be justified in shooting him in the morning. He had made the quarrel a personal one by this last outrageous conduct.

He knew how much I had risked to save his skin; and to persist in this intention to shoot me if he could, from a fancied regard for what he deemed his honour, put him outside the pale of all consideration.

But I grew calmer after a while, and by the time I had reached my rooms I had resolved to wait until the morning and see whether his rage would cool sufficiently in the meantime to allow of his viewing his conduct in its proper light.

The events of the night had intensely excited me: the discovery I had made in regard to Alexandrov, Normia's open expression of confidence, the knowledge that my freedom was now in sight, and lastly the struggle at von Epstein's house. But I put every thought of the kind away and set myself resolutely to get as much sleep as possible, so as to have my nerves in fit condition for the fight in the morning.

If I was to be killed by this little fool, nothing else would matter, of course; and I had too much at stake now not to take every care of myself. The whole axis of life had been changed by the discovery of Provost's murderer; and now my chief object must be to have a steady hand in the morning.

For that I must have sleep, and accordingly

to sleep I went. But I was up betimes, and ready before the Prince arrived. If anything, I was the cooler of the two, I think. He was almost excited in this eagerness that I should kill von Epstein; and as he said nothing about the foiled attempt of the previous night, I concluded that he had not heard anything about it. It was Stephanie's own effort.

"I understand you can do almost anything with a pistol," said the Prince.

"Did you get that from Arnheim? I once offered, in a swaggering jest, to trim his moustaches with a revolver."

"But you *are* a good shot?" he asked, very earnestly.

"I think I could hit a man."

"He will kill you if he can. He is mad against you. His conduct to you last night was the vilest I have ever witnessed. Even a coward would have had his blood set boiling. And you are no coward, monsieur."

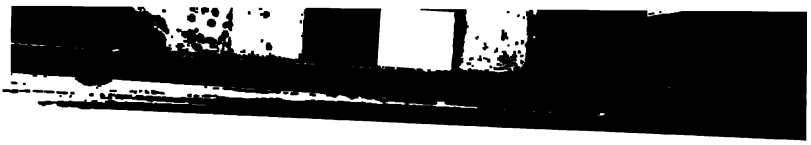
"You needn't try to work me up, Prince."

"Ah, you English, you are so cool—so cold-blooded. Why do you pass yourself off as a Frenchman, monsieur?"

"If you ask me after this affair is over I may be disposed to tell you. But at present, if you don't mind, I'd rather just be quiet;" and I said no more until the carriage drew up at the place of the meeting.

To my concern I saw Arnheim on the ground, smoking a cigarette and chatting with a stranger.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.



[redacted]

If you want them you can have them. This is a duel, not a murder, Prince. I won't have Arnheim touch me if I'm hurt, and much more certainly will I not let him touch von Epstein."

I was certain from the Prince's manner that my guess was right, and that if I only wounded my opponent, Arnheim's treatment was to do the rest. A very hot wrangle followed, and we were in the thick of it when von Epstein arrived. As he had fortunately brought a doctor with him Arnheim's capacity to do mischief was checkmated. So I got my way, and he left.

But relations between Lepova and myself were seriously strained by the incident, and had there been [redacted] I have quarrelled. As it was [redacted] a strong

turned away to arrange the preliminaries of the duel.

Up to the last I had hoped a night's reflection would bring von Epstein to reason and enable him to see there was no real quarrel between us; but presumably that blow of mine had maddened him, and, judging by his expression, his temper was quite as furious as on the preceding night.

He had dressed himself in regulation duel attire—all in black, that is—and his long frock coat was carefully buttoned right up to the throat, so that not a spot of white should afford a mark for my bullet.

He was of the demonstrative and rather stagey type of men; and appeared to think he could best show his courage by posing and expressing his contempt of me in look and attitude. Thus, while the seconds were choosing and measuring the ground and completing the other arrangements, he stood with arms folded and head thrown back, glaring now and then at me with looks of defiance.

Except at the moment of his arrival, when I looked for some indication that he at least remembered the events of the preceding night, I took no notice of him, but walked up and down considering very anxiously what course to adopt. I was absolutely confident of my ability to shoot him just where I wished. My hand and pulse were both steady; but, although his conduct to me had been both vile and [illegible] and his persistence in forcing th[illegible] my help [illegible] previous night [illegible] bomina[illegible] rank from the

thought of taking his life. The circumstances made it impossible that I should do more than wound him.

I had come to the ground resolved not to hit him at all, but if he was bent on killing me it would do no good to miss him. If his first shot failed, the thing would go on until he succeeded in his object.

That was far too quixotic a course for me, and I decided to try to break his firing arm, and so make it impossible for him to continue the fight.

When the arrangements were completed Lepova made a last attempt to spur my anger.

"He means to kill you, monsieur," he said, as he was placing me. "That has been his cry to his seconds all the way to the ground. He is mad that you struck him. If you take my counsel, you will turn very rapidly and get your shot first."

I let this go without reply, as I knew his object.

We were placed back to back at a distance of twelve yards, and our weapons were to be held down at arm's length while Lepova counted three. We were then to turn and fire.

Just before we turned our backs on one another von Epstein gave me a last furious look, and I was not sorry to see it. I knew that if he was in anything like the passion his looks suggested, he would be far less likely to hit me than if he had been cool.

In the few seconds before the signal was given I concentrated my thoughts upon my

aim. If he fired, as many Austrians did, with his arm straight I would send my bullet into his shoulder, but if with the arm bent I would aim at his elbow.

Then the Prince asked if we were ready, and counted three, very slowly.

At the word "Three" I turned, not too hurriedly, and found that my opponent already had me covered and was taking a very deliberate aim at my head. His arm was bent, and I let fly at his elbow.

It was a very narrow thing for me. His bullet sang past my head, skinning the tip of my left ear and making a little furrow in my hair. But my aim was better than his, for the bullet smashed his arm just at the elbow.

That his manner had not been mere bluster he soon proved by demanding that the fight should go on. He could use his left hand as well as his right, he said, and fight on he would.

But I refused peremptorily, and my refusal led to a little scene. He was very violent—called me a coward and a good many other things, and swore generally at the English, to induce me to fight on. But I declared firmly that I would not fight a wounded man, and to that I held. When one of his seconds intervened with a remark somewhat on the same lines, however, I resolved on a little theatrical display.

I walked right up to him and stared him fixedly in his eyes, and said, very quietly, "I don't know who you are, and don't wish to. When Baron von Epstein has recovered from this hurt I will meet him again if he wishes it.

But next time I shall put my bullet into his head instead of into his arm. I could have done it just as easily this time. I'll prove that to you."

I took up a pistol, and, pointing to a small knot in a tree at some twenty paces distance, I turned my back as in a duel, and, swinging round quickly, sent a bullet straight into the centre of it.

"Now, monsieur, if you, or anyone else here, wishes to insult me or my country, I am willing to take it up on the spot. But, I warn you, I shall shoot to kill."

There was no response. A little swagger is a most useful argument at times; and this one had quite a soothing effect. Even von Epstein himself subsided.

The Prince was, however, disposed to take a very different view. He wanted to lecture me both for not having killed von Epstein outright and for having declined the second shot, and demanded, angrily, to know the reason.

"Because I am an Englishman, Prince," was my reply.

"You don't seem to understand, monsieur——" he began, when I cut him short.

"That will do, thank you, Prince. You have said a good many nasty things to me this morning, and I am at the end of my forbearance. Anything else you may say I shall resent very strongly," and my look said the rest.

"I cannot understand you, monsieur," he exclaimed, with a shrug of perplexity. "But

in letting this man leave the place alive you have done us all a very bad turn."

"I know what is in your thoughts, of course," I said, as we crossed to his carriage; "and I think the time has come when you should understand me. As we drove here you asked me why I posed as a Frenchman. Let us go to my rooms and I will tell you. I can promise you that you will be interested."

"Certainly I will come, monsieur," he agreed readily, and, giving the coachman the order to drive to my rooms, he entered the carriage.

Matters were all going as I would have had them, and I was in the highest spirits.

The means of reinstating myself were in my hands, and at the same time I held the reins of control in regard to all the other affairs.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FRANK TALK TO LEPOVA.

DURING the drive Prince Lepova and I said very little. I had decided that the time had come when I could safely speak quite frankly to him. I had no longer anything to fear from the truth, thank heaven.

I knew that Alexandrov was the murderer of Provost, and I had luckily been able to get the knowledge without raising his suspicions that I had it. I should have him safe under lock and key within a few hours, and the whole history of my supposed death would be carefully investigated. My influence with my father's old friend would secure that being done thoroughly and secretly.

I had been careful to learn the names and whereabouts of all those who had been concerned in that sham operation, and before the day was out everyone of them should be lodged in gaol. The Austrian police could be trusted to do the rest, when inspired by such influence as I could command.

I need not give away the secrets of the conspiracy, nor betray either Stephanie or Lepova. I would hold my tongue about everything, indeed, provided that Normia was left free to decide for herself what course she would take. But I would stand no nonsense. They

had forced me into the thing. I had been branded as a murderer, and I had been tricked into this quarrel with von Epstein in order that I might commit another murder, or, as it seemed, lose my own life as the alternative.

The whip was in my hands now, however. While others had had it, it had been used to scourge my back so roughly that I need have no scruples about using it on them if they forced me. It should rest with Stephanie and Lepova themselves whether I betrayed the whole plot.

The Prince was very anxious to hear what I had to say, and as soon as we reached my rooms he asked impatiently, and with a distinctly peremptory note: "Now, M. Provost, what is the meaning of all this?"

"When you were last in this room, Prince, it was to give me a commission to—we may as well use plain terms—to murder Baron von Epstein. Presumably you came because you believed that I had already murdered in cold blood for the good of your cause Guy Pershore, the Englishman, who had been sent to Vienna by the Servian Government to find out what you were doing. Is that so?"

"Go on, monsieur."

"You are no doubt aware that I told the Baroness Dolgoroff that I would have no hand in anything of the sort, and then together you concocted that little plan by which the quarrel was forced and the duel made necessary. Even after that, when I told her I would not play the part you assigned to me, she attempted to have him murdered in his own house last night."

"I protest, monsieur——"

"You needn't," I broke in quietly. "We are going to indulge in some very plain talk, and I shall not say anything that is not true. Don't trouble to contradict me, therefore, or to protest."

He was very indignant, and rose, saying very angrily, "I am at a loss to understand you. Do you mean to insinuate that I speak other than the truth?"

I paused, and lighted a cigar with much deliberation.

"Do you think I'm the man to be frightened by a show of temper, Prince? If so, you'd better go. But, if you *do* go, you will miss a plain statement that touches you very closely. That is your concern, however. But if you decide to stop and listen put away all idea of scaring me."

He stood a few seconds in hesitation, then sat down again, and laughed with an assumption of indifference.

"Go on, monsieur."

"Having concocted that scheme of indirect assassination, your next step was to be angry with me about Arnheim. I would not allow him to have the chance of finishing professionally what I might commence. After that you were again angry because, having shown you that I knew how to handle a pistol, I had not deliberately used my skill to shoot your victim."

"This is only your own interpretation, monsieur," he said, as I paused, and he waved his hand, as if indulging my caprice.

"I'm not blaming you exactly. The mistake was not an unnatural one, seeing the number of men you have about you accustomed to do your bidding in such affairs for the good of the cause. You took me for one of them."

"You are a little tedious, M. Provost."

"I don't think you'll find the time exactly wasted," I returned drily. "However, I'll take a subject next that will interest you—the Princess Normia. Ah, I thought that would rouse you." He was on his feet again, looking very black and ugly.

"I don't allow you to discuss her, monsieur."

"Then you'll have to go, Prince, for I have a lot to say about her. If you don't mean to listen—well, the door is not locked;" and I rose and opened it.

But he did not go. He had obviously come to the conclusion that there was something really serious in the interview.

"I will hear you," he said curtly, resuming his seat.

"I wish you to believe that I have no sort of hostile feeling against you personally—except in regard to this forced quarrel. You smile at such a statement from Gerard Provost; but you won't smile presently. What I have to say in regard to the Princess is this. She has been forced into this conspiracy against her will because she believes that the Baroness Dolgoroff can endanger the lives of those who are very dear to her—her mother and sister. Now, she must be allowed at once to communicate openly with her friends, and to make her decision, in

the light of information I can give her, whether she will go forward with your scheme or draw back from it. And in that I include the marriage with you."

He was interested enough now, and his brows almost met in the heavy frown with which he heard me.

"Your reasons?" he said sharply, as I paused.

"I know—and I shall tell her—that if she makes it known to the Servian Government that she has been forced into this thing and renounces everything the moment the true position is made clear to her, neither she nor those she loves will be in any danger. She and they are only in danger so long as she persists in her present apparent rebellion against the Government."

"How do you pretend to know this?"

"I don't pretend. I know. I have it from one of the really powerful Ministers in Servia."

"What you mean is," he cried, with an angry laugh, "that we are to abandon everything at your orders!"

"I give no orders, Prince. But I do mean that the Princess must be told the truth and left to judge for herself."

"And your personal motive?" he rapped out.

"Yes, I think I'll tell you even that," I said, after a pause. "Before her marriage with you was suggested, I had the honour to ask her to marry me. She declined, it is true. But at that time I believed she cared for me, and that

the answer she gave would have been different had she not been under the thumb of the Baroness Dolgoroff. Together, you have terrorised the Princess, but I need not call her that, because I know, as all the world knows, that she has no claim to such a title. That claim has been made simply by you, and merely for the purposes of your conspiracy. But the fact remains that together you have terrorised her into consenting to all this—the marriage included—and the time has come when she must be freed from it."

He sat thinking closely for some time, his head leaning on his hand. He appreciated the seriousness of the position, and was alive to all it meant to him and his schemes.

Presently he fixed his black, piercing eyes on me intently.

"There is, of course, something further to be explained. Who are you, monsieur?"

I paused.

"Do you not know?" I asked, tensely.

"Who are you, monsieur?" he repeated.

I met his look, and answered slowly, letting fall each syllable deliberately.

"I am the man who was dead—Guy Pershore, the secretary of his Excellency the Minister, to whom I referred just now."

"And now his spy," he returned, viciously.

"No, I am no spy. Like Normia herself, I have been forced into this position by circumstances into which I need not go. But you may take my word. Further than that, you may rest completely assured that what I have learnt in the last few days will not pass

my lips, unless I am forced to speak in the interests of Normia or in self-defence. I must, of course, clear myself."

Again he sat plunged in earnest thought.

"There are, of course, many things I do not at present understand, and many questions I must ask, not only of you, but of Baroness Dolgoroff and others. Will you come with me to her?"

"No, thank you. I am safer where I am, Prince."

"Mr. Pershore, if that is really your name and what you have told me is true, I pledge you my sacred word of honour that I will answer for your absolute safety."

"And about the Princess?"

He shook his head.

"No. About that I say nothing. I must have time to think."

"I will take your word, Prince, and will come," I answered. I had put the question about Normia as a sort of test, and if he had at once agreed to do all I required I should not have trusted him.

"Shall we go now?" he asked, rising.

"No—this afternoon, preferably. For one thing, I have not yet breakfasted, and for another, this is the first duel I have fought, and I am not ashamed to say that I feel a good deal shaken up."

"This afternoon, then. I offer you my hand, monsieur, because I respect you as one whom I believe to be absolutely sincere, although opposed to me in many ways. Moreover, your story shows that you have been

grievously wronged. I will endeavour to arrange that you shall have an opportunity of speaking frankly to the Princess, but of course in my presence."

As we shook hands I asked him, "Are you still confident of success, Prince?"

"Why do you ask that? I am getting to feel that you generally have strong reasons behind your words, monsieur. Have you now?"

"I think you have been misled as to the chances of success."

"By whom?" came the question with a flash of the black eyes.

"I name no names, but I have grounds for believing that the whole movement is on the verge of collapse."

"Do you get that from Belgrade?"

"I have held no communication with Belgrade since—since I have been embroiled in this."

He frowned and pursed his lips. The frown changed to a very sad smile, as he sighed and answered, "It may be so. But you have a tradition in your country, Mr. Pershore, that if a ship sinks the captain should remain at his post and sink with it."

He went away then, and I sat down to breakfast.

It is often the commonplace act that emphasises a great crisis in a man's life, and the hearty appetite with which I ate my breakfast that morning—the first meal for which I had had a really healthy zest—may be said to have signalised my recovery of a vigorous appreciation of life.

I had brought much of my trouble on myself by grievous blundering, and I had been horribly punished. I had not realised until that morning how acute the torture had been. I had been saved more by good luck than by my own efforts, and I had got out of as hopeless a mess as ever threatened a man with ruin and death.

I flattered myself that I had learned my lesson, however, and I would act much more warily for the future. Fortune had relented, and had put far better cards into my hands than I had deserved, and I could scarcely lose now, however badly I might play them.

A very confident smile was on my face as I looked at myself in the glass when dressing to go out. I could afford to smile, indeed, for I was looking, not at Gerard Provost, the despicable spy, but once more at Guy Pershore, the young diplomat with a career, a good name, a reputation, and an opinion of himself which was certainly as high as that which anyone else could entertain.

My course was quite clear. I would first see my father's old friend, and then Catarina, to show her how Alexandrov had fooled her, and secure his arrest.

It would be difficult for any man to be more surprised than Baron Vodressy when I walked into his room and, without much preamble, told him so much of my story as was necessary to secure his help. As a first step, I asked that all those who had been concerned in the bogus operation—Arnheim, Hammerstein, Yuldoff, the nurses, and others: I gave him a full list —should be arrested at once. I wanted to get

them safely under lock and key before any suspicion of my movements was aroused.

Alexandrov's name I did not give him. I felt that my pledge to Catarina bound me not to mention him until I had seen her. The pledge had not been intended to cover immunity for him as Provost's murderer, of course; and I had no doubt that the moment she knew the facts she would be as anxious for his punishment as I was, and would help me to find him. But it was fairer to wait.

I went straight from the Minister's office to her. How I enjoyed that walk! My step was firm, my head erect once more, and my heart light. I could look my fellows in the face without shrinking. I was full of the vigour of life. I was a free man once again—free alike from the haunting consciousness of disgrace and the grim shadow of impending death.

In other words, I was just in the mood when bad news was calculated to strike the hardest blow. And bad news there was for me at Catarina's.

The instant we met she made it apparent that her attitude toward me had entirely changed. Her manner was as chill as an iceberg.

"I am surprised you come to me, monsieur," was her greeting.

"Why?"

"You have broken faith with me. I accepted your pledge that no harm should come to Alexandrov. You have not kept it. He was to have brought me news this morning, and

set me face to face with the man I seek. But, instead of that, you have driven him away. His life has been threatened, and he has fled, Heaven knows where. I am baulked of my vengeance, and it is your doing."

"Fled from the city!" I repeated, aghast at the news.

I realised my blunder, with a shiver of dismay. I had had him in my hands, and had let him slip through them, and in a moment all the fine castles I had built upon my discovery were in ruins.

The news could not have been more disas-. trous.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DETECTIVE WORK.

CATARINA in a bad temper was a very difficult person to deal with; and she was now in a furious passion. Worse even than that, she had convinced herself that I had broken faith with her; and it was clear that I must try to shake this conviction before I told her what had passed on the previous night at the Black House.

"I have not broken my pledge, Catarina. Alexandrov's name has not passed my lips to anyone," I assured her, speaking very calmly.

"Why has he fled, then? He was to take me to face Dromach. He has not come; and no one but you had the knowledge which would place him in danger."

"Let us find him and get the reason from him."

"The only reason why he should be threatened would be on account of the Princess. You alone knew of that. What else can I think except that you have betrayed him?"

"The attempt did fail last night, it is true. Let me tell you just what occurred, and you will see——"

"I do not want to hear," she burst in fiercely. "The attempt having failed, he has been threatened by those who were in it. What

right had you to cheat me of my vengeance? What is the Princess to me compared with that? Leave me, monsieur. I do not believe your word. You are hiding things from me. It is easy to see that. Do not come to me again. I trust you no longer. I was but a fool to trust you at all;" and, having worked herself up into a fine frenzy, she flung the door open. "Go, monsieur," she cried, her great eyes blazing with passion.

She looked magnificent in her wrath, and I could quite understand that Vosbach had spoken no more than the truth when he had said that Provost had been desperately afraid of her.

It is difficult to know just what line to take with an angry woman of any nationality, but an angry Greek is, perhaps, the most difficult of all. I tried calmness first. I met her fiery gaze for a second or so, and then, with great deliberation, sat down.

But it was clearly not a case for masterly inactivity. My coolness aggravated her. She stamped her foot and clenched her hands in passion, and literally hissed out a command to me to leave the house.

I changed my tactics, therefore. Springing to my feet, I let out an oath, slammed the door viciously, set my back against it, and meeting her look with one quite as fierce, I thundered out:

"Who are you that you dare to make this vile charge against me? It is false—as false as Hell itself, and neither you nor I leave this room until you have unsaid it. I am no Greek to

pass my word and then break it. And no child or fool to be hectored by an angry woman."

This answered much better than my coolness. In surprise at my sudden outbreak she fell back a step or two as if in fear that some violent act would follow the angry words—Greeks do strike their women at times. But she rallied her courage, and a very fierce quarrel raged until I saw that her fury was beginning to work itself out.

Then I threw myself into my chair again, and allowed her to indulge in a monologue during which the flame of her wrath flickered up and down and finally went out. A silence followed, lasting quite two or three minutes.

"Now let us talk sensibly," I said. "We have both been raging quite long enough, but with the difference that you meant what you said and I didn't. We'll see now if we can't climb a few more feet of that pass of which you spoke the other day."

But this admission that I had not really lost my temper was another mistake. It added to her distrust, and she turned sullen and suspicious.

"You act well, monsieur. You have had much practice in misleading people," she answered.

"I have never deceived you. The first time I saw you I put my life in your hands. I told you my secret unreservedly."

"I had to come to you. You did not come to me, monsieur."

"I did not go to anyone if I could help it. But the thing is this—I told you the plain truth and you believed me. Now I am going to tell

you exactly what occurred last night, and leave you to draw your own conclusions." And I went on to describe in detail the scene with Alexandrov.

But she shook her head. She was too full of her distrust to believe me.

"You do not know Alexandrov, or you would not think as you do. He is not a child to be scared as you think. I know he was near the scene of the murder—how else could he have seen Dromach? It is not for that he has fled. You have not told me all."

I tried to shake this conviction, but I might as well have tried to bring down the cross of St. Paul's Cathedral by shaking one of the buttresses. And I had to give it up.

"Come with me to Dromach's lodgings and see if he has returned, and whether Alexandrov has told us the truth about him."

She shook her head again.

"I will do my work alone, monsieur," was her answer.

"As you will," I said, rising. "But you must not tell Alexandrov what I have told you, and as this deed was not in our thoughts when I pledged myself not to harm him, I shall, of course, bring it home to him if I can."

"You are wrong, monsieur. The man we seek is Dromach," she said in a tone of unalterable conviction; "and, by driving Alexandrov from the country, you have destroyed the only means of bringing the charge home to him."

Greatly disheartened by the result of this interview, I resolved to ferret out the old Jew

"'I DID NOT COME MERELY ABOUT BOOTS.'"

(*Page 269.*)

shoemaker, Steinberg, with whom Dromach was said to lodge, and make some inquiries on my own account. If these proved useless, I should have to give Alexandrov's name to the police, and let them track him.

I succeeded, after some difficulty, in finding the old shoemaker, and a very singular character he proved to be. He lived in a low Jewish quarter of the city, his shop was dirty and ill-smelling, and he himself was grimly in keeping with the surroundings.

He was at first surly, suspicious, and uncommunicative. A visit from anyone respectably dressed was enough to start distrust and put him on the defensive, and he was intensely curious to learn who I was and how I had heard of him.

Matters improved somewhat when he found I had money and was willing to let him cheat me. I bought a couple of pairs of boots, and paid his price without question. Then I let him measure me for a third pair which he was to make, and I gave him a cigar and sent out for some wine, preparatory to telling him the little fairy tale I had prepared.

"I did not come merely about boots," I said, after he had had a couple of glasses of the wine.

"I guessed that much, Excellency," he said, with a knowing wink—the wine having had a little effect on him. "Gentlefolks don't come to old Steinberg for nothing."

"The fact is that I think you can be of some service to me—service to be paid for, of course—under the following circumstances;"

and I went on with a tale to the effect that a servant of mine—an Englishman—had left me a little time since somewhat mysteriously, and was supposed to be in the Jewish quarter of the city. Could he help me to find him?

"He stole something, I suppose?" he leered.

"Oh, no, nothing that I should wish to punish him for," I replied quickly. "But after he had gone I missed something of no great value in itself, but very valuable to me for private reasons, and I think he could help me to recover it. It was a dagger;" and I vamped a yarn about how it had come into my possession, and gave a detailed description of the knife with which Alexandrov had killed Provost.

That his interest was aroused was shown by the avaricious gleam of his beady, shaggy-browed little eyes. "I believe I have seen such a knife, Excellency. How much would it be worth to recover it?"

I named a sum large enough to appeal to his cupidity.

"Your servant was English, you say, not Greek?"

"English. But why do you ask?"

"If he had been Greek, I have a lodger who would find him. He knows all the Greeks in Vienna, Excellency."

"That won't help us much, I'm afraid," I said, casually. "It's a Greek knife as I told you, but—what's your lodger's name, by the way? Could I have a word with him?"

"He is away from the city, but returns to-night. His name is Dromach. He had just

such a knife as you describe; but he is an honest fellow, and would have come by it honestly. I think he sold it, too. If together we get it back for you, you will give me my share of the money, Excellency?"

"Oh, yes. Here's an earnest of it," and I laid down a couple of gold coins. "Comes back to-night, eh? How long has he been away? Since my servant left me?"

"About three weeks—no, four weeks, Excellency."

"Well, I'll call and have a word with him to-morrow. Don't say anything to anyone else until I have seen him," I said, as I rose. "I suppose you are quite sure that he has been away all the time you say."

"My daughter will know;" and he shuffled away into the house. "It is five weeks, Excellency," he announced on his return. "He has been in Athens all the time. My daughter knows. She keeps house, and he writes to her."

I had the news I needed. Dromach had left Vienna long before the day of the crime, and Alexandrov's story to Catarina, implicating him, was a fabrication to turn her suspicion from himself. I could see his plan clearly. The instant she had shown him the dagger he had realised his own danger. Remembering that he had got it from Dromach, who had himself threatened Provost, through jealousy, Alexandrov had taken advantage of Dromach's absence from the city to put the crime on him.

The prospect of the money to be paid for the abduction of Normia had kept him in the city for the time, but he had obviously planned

to leave the instant that was carried out, and had intended to induce Catarina to go with him on the pretence of finding Dromach. The failure of the abduction had then checkmated him, and hence his last message to her that he was in danger of his life.

On the following day I would get Dromach's identification of the dagger, and then put him and the police to find Alexandrov.

The news obtained from the old shoemaker counterbalanced in some measure the check I had received from Catarina. I could probably do without her help now, and I was in better spirits as I returned to my rooms.

To my surprise I found Grundelhof there.

"Why are you here?" I asked curtly.

"I wish to speak to you, monsieur."

"I have neither time nor inclination to listen to you."

"It is about last night's affair. Your part in preventing the success of our scheme in regard to the Princess."

"And what was my part, pray?"

It was, perhaps, best to listen to him, I thought.

"It was you who surprised Alexandrov and drove him away."

"Did he tell you I had done that?"

"No. But I know it was you. No one else was there."

"Confront Alexandrov with me, and I will show you that he has lied."

"He has fled from the city. When I ascertained it was your work I went to find him. He has vanished."

"The best thing you can do is to go after him. Is that all?"

"No. I mean to know the reason of your conduct."

A hot answer rose to my lips, but I checked it, seeing a possible advantage. I laughed.

"You thought you could do better with the Baroness's aid than with mine? Now, perhaps, you see that you could not, eh?"

"Alexandrov betrayed us to you, then?" he exclaimed warmly.

"Did he? Find him, and you'll soon know the truth. But one minute you accuse me of having frightened him away and the next that we were acting in collusion. You forget yourself. One of the two must be false."

"There is a good deal about you that is false," he retorted.

"And yourself? When do you return to your regiment, Captain Nescher?"

"You hinted at this the other night. How do you know me?"

"Have I not been to Belgrade?"

He looked at me keenly, and then answered, in a slow, significant tone, "Yes. You went as one of us, and returned against us. You are not the coward I once thrashed. You do not know things he knew, and you do know much that he did not. You are not Gerard Provost. That's why I have come to you."

"You are a very entertaining person, captain," I laughed.

"I can be other than entertaining," was the blunt reply.

"I have no time at present for another duel."

"If you are not Gerard Provost there is only one other man you can be—Mr. Guy Pershore, the Englishman, in the service of a Minister of the Servian Government. There are curious rumours about what happened at the time of his supposed death."

"If I were to give your real name to Prince Lepova, captain, there would be something more substantial than rumours about you."

"And that is just what you would have done had you been the real Gerard Provost," he retorted, very shrewdly. "It confirms my opinion."

"Your opinion is nothing to me."

"On the contrary, sir, it must be, for it will be reported to Belgrade. If you are the Minister's secretary, how came you to thwart a coup which you know would have destroyed this conspiracy instantly? You, who were sent here for the very purpose of destroying it?"

"I find no use in following out your ingenious speculations," I answered, lightly, to hide my genuine embarrassment at his questions.

"It was an act of treachery for which you will have to answer, sir. I shall go at once to Belgrade to report this."

"I should think it is alike your duty and the best thing you can do. Don't let me detain you."

"You will find your treachery too serious a matter to be disposed of with a sneer," he said angrily.

"Indeed!"

"Unless you are prepared to change your

attitude and give us the assistance we have a right to demand."

"Are we coming at last to the real purpose of this visit?" I asked, with a sharp glance. "Having first tried to kill me, and then having bungled your own plan, you come to me to concoct another to cover your failure! Go to Belgrade—report your failure—put the blame where you will, and air any theories you please. But don't think to frighten me."

"I have the Baroness's word that you were present last night," he said doggedly.

I laughed contemptuously.

"You have been fooled by this Greek, Captain Nescher. I repeat: find that scoundrel and confront him with me, and I pledge you my word, you shall know at once all that passed."

"What did occur?"

"Do your own work, sir, and repair your own bungling," I cried sternly.

"Are you Mr. Guy Pershore?"

"To you I am Gerard Provost, the man you tried to kill. And now, go, please."

"I shall go to Belgrade," he exclaimed furiously.

"You can go to the devil for aught I care and choose your own route;" and, with a last laugh, I slammed the door after him.

But it was both an unexpected and unwelcome complication. It was true enough that Belgrade would take it badly that I had thwarted the captain's scheme, and I should have an ugly corner to turn unless I won my way that afternoon at the Black House.

My old chief knew all about my feelings for

Normia. He would see my motives at a glance; and I must be able to show him that I had smashed up the conspiracy at least as effectively as by the other way, or I should have to face a charge of betraying the interests confided to me.

It began to look as if the troubles which awaited me in my own name were going to be almost as serious as those which had beset me as Gerard Provost.

Certainly the interview had added greatly to the importance of the proceedings that afternoon with the Prince. I started for the meeting with a very full appreciation of the difficulties in front of me, and my reception at the Black House was anything but reassuring.

The moment I was inside the doors they were closed behind me. I had never known such a thing occur before."

"Why is that?" I asked the man in charge.

"The Prince has ordered me to report all arrivals to him at once, monsieur, and to allow no one to leave until that has been done."

Had I been fool enough to walk into a trap? It looked like it, despite the Prince's pledge. But if that were the case, the way out of it was clearly not by that door, for two or three men immediately placed themselves between it and me.

So I turned away with a shrug of indifference, and told them to announce me to the Prince at once.

But I did not like the look of matters at all. And the more so as, like a blockhead, I had come unarmed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I CAN DIE HAPPY, NOW."

I RESOLVED to put a bold front on matters and, without waiting for the servant to bring any message from Lepova, I went up to Stephanie's rooms. The man there appeared to have had no instructions concerning me, and let me pass as usual.

This might mean that, if the Prince intended mischief, he considered it enough for the present to make sure that I did not leave the house. On the other hand, the orders below stairs might be no more than a general measure of precaution.

Stephanie's reception showed that, so far, nothing had been said to her. She was greatly excited, but her excitement was due to the fact that I had prevented the scheme against Normia overnight and had not killed von Epstein in the duel. She broke out into vehement reproaches that I had done no more than wound him.

"Why are you so bitter against him?" I asked when I could get in a word.

"He will ruin us. He knows everything. His death was necessary. He will betray us all to the Austrian Government. Oh, it was mad of you to let him escape!"

"What you really mean is that for some

personal reason you hated the man, and forced me into the quarrel that I might shoot him. Well, the scheme miscarried."

"You took his insults tamely enough."

"Because he did not understand the position and I did. Anyway, I don't hold myself ready to kill every man who offends you. As for the cause, you had already arranged for its failure and secured your way out, so that part of the matter cannot be your reason."

She sprang up as if overcome with indignation, but her eyes signalled alarm.

"Guy! How dare you?" she cried.

"Drop theatricals! I know things," I replied, very curtly.

"What do you mean?"

"That I had it from your friends. Captain Nescher told me of your hand in last night's affair against Normia, and the other I gathered from—Count von Kassler."

"My friends? Why, I have never even heard of such men," she protested.

"You may as well sit down again and take it quietly, Stephanie. The man who calls himself Grundelhof has guessed my secret and came to charge me with treachery for having checkmated his attempt. Taking me for a Servian spy, like himself, he gave away the whole thing. As for the man who comes here as Lieutenant Unterling," I added, with a significant smile, "well, he thought, of course, that, as the friend of the big man of the Government here, I knew everything. There was thus no reason why he should not speak frankly, too."

This beat her. Chiefly, I think, the suggestion that Count Kassler had told me of her double betrayal, and she was too agitated to attempt a denial, or to reply at all, indeed. She sat fingering some papers and trembling violently, and the colour gradually ebbed from her face, leaving it dead white.

"After the duel this morning I had a frank talk with Prince Lepova——"

"My God! What did you tell him?" she broke in excitedly.

"I didn't give you away. But I made it plain that his marriage with Normia will not take place, and that she must be told the facts and allowed to decide for herself whether she will go any further with you two. I am here to see her this afternoon and have a chance to speak frankly what I know."

"You won't betray me to him, Guy?"

"No, but as he pledged his word for my safety here, and I am not at all sure he means to keep it, things may take an ugly turn."

"If you tell him he will kill me," she cried. desperately. "Does he know who you are?"

There was no time for me to reply as Normia and the Prince entered. She was very pale and agitated as he led her to a seat.

"You see I have kept my word, monsieur," he said to me. Then to Stephanie:

"This gentleman made some very vital communications to me this morning, and we agreed the matters should be discussed in your presence. He wishes to speak to the Princess. Now, monsieur."

Stephanie had made a great effort to regain her self-possession.

"You did not tell me of this, Prince."

"I have told you now," was the reply, in a tone of unmistakable hostility.

"You also pledged your honour for my personal safety, Prince Lepova."

"I am not accustomed to break my word, monsieur," he answered, coldly.

I turned to Normia.

"The case is this. I am not Gerard Provost, and never have been. I am Guy Pershore—the man you knew and trusted in Belgrade. I told Prince Lepova so this morning. Baroness Dolgoroff has known it all through."

Stephanie interrupted with a gesture of repudiation.

"I told the Prince that I had once ventured to ask you to honour me with your hand, but that you had what you believed conclusive reasons why we should not meet again. I now know those reasons, and know they have no foundation."

Normia shot a swift glance at me, but lowered her eyes again without replying.

"When I found you here I concluded that you had been forced into this thing by the same constraint; and I told Prince Lepova that I must have an opportunity of telling you the truth, so that you could decide, in the light of it, whether to persist in this present course or to withdraw from it at once."

She looked first at Stephanie, whose face wore a somewhat scornful smile, and from her to Lepova.

"Monsieur, I——"

She stopped abruptly, as Lepova fixed his keen eyes on her.

"I am in a position to assure you—I had this from his own lips—that my chief in Belgrade knows that your mother and sister are alive, where they are, and under what name they are living. And, further, that the Government will take no steps whatever against them provided that they—and you—take no side in any troubles against the Government. By this present action of yours you are doing the very thing you believed you were avoiding—you are exposing them to danger. What, then, will you decide to do?"

"I do not hesitate a moment," cried Normia, instantly. "If I had only known this—oh, it was cruel! it was infamous! How could you deceive me, Baroness? I only consented that I might save them. I——" and then she broke down and burst into tears.

Lepova sat with a face of steel. Stephanie, on her part, was afraid to speak before him, and I waited in silence for Normia to regain self-command. A long and very embarrassing pause it was.

"I will go away at once—to Belgrade," declared Normia, when she had mastered her agitation. "The truth must be told. You will take me, monsieur?"

"Certainly. I am convinced it is your safest course—the only safe one, indeed," I replied readily, delighted by this proof of her confidence.

"Wait," interposed the Prince harshly.

"A decision like this cannot be made without deliberation. And there is much to be explained."

Stephanie watched him intently, and glanced at me. She was afraid of him.

"I shall not alter my decision," declared Normia, firmly.

"We have as yet no confirmation of this gentleman's story."

"I do not need it," she retorted.

"I do, however. He tells us he is the man we believed he himself had killed. In his assumed character he has informed himself of all our plans, and asserts that you, Baroness, have known his secret—have been in league with him, in other words."

"I declare——" began Stephanie, when he interrupted her.

"Wait, if you please," he said, and his tone grew increasingly harsh and threatening as he proceeded. "The proof rests with you, Baroness. I wish you to realise that entirely. You have been almost the head of everything. You have, we believe, rendered great services to our cause, and we have trusted you implicitly. I shall take your word in this. If you deny what this man has said, he is a traitor, and shall answer for it with his life. But"—and he paused—"if you admit it, your treachery will have been a thousandfold greater than his, and you shall surely die for it—if I have to strangle you with my own hands—to avenge my betrayed friends. That I declare on my honour."

Every word was spoken slowly and deliber-

ately, with all the sternness of implacable purpose, and Stephanie's alarm and perplexity waxed with every syllable.

If there were any truth in her professions of regard for me, it must have been a terrible ordeal for her. She knew Lepova would keep his word, and she feared him. Upon her answer depended her own life or that of the man she declared she loved.

There was a silence lasting for a few tense, awesome moments.

Lepova broke it.

"I do not understand your silence, Baroness; but it is well that you should realise all that depends upon your answer. Meanwhile, there is a question for you to answer, monsieur. If you are Mr. Pershore, where is the real Gerard Provost?"

"Dead. He was murdered in my rooms in mistake for me."

Normia shuddered.

"When our agents reached the room you two alone were there—he dead, you alive and in possession of the papers he had brought from Belgrade. He had been killed by you. Why?"

"I had no hand in his death. He was dead when I reached the room."

"You accepted the responsibility for the deed then, and afterwards you took his name, played his part, became him, in fact. Why?"

"I acted as I did at the time because had I not accepted the mistake which your agents made, they would have carried out their appointed work and have taken my life. Afterwards it was impossible for me to explain

until I had found the real murderer of Provost."

"You were sent to Vienna to destroy our cause, and you took advantage of the mistake to turn spy, you mean?"

"I mean nothing of the sort, I am no spy."

His lip curled.

"I find that impossible of belief," he answered deliberately.

I grew hot at the insult.

"I will go, then," and I got up.

"No, monsieur. That cannot be permitted."

"You pledged me your word of honour."

"I did not then know how serious a turn matters would take here."

"I find that impossible of belief, your highness," I retorted, giving him back his own phrase.

But he brushed the sneer aside with a wave of the hand.

He turned to Stephanie—"Now, Baroness."

He had made a mistake, however, in giving her time to collect her thoughts.

"I deny your right—yes, even yours, Prince—to question me. My services to the cause——"

"Are now on their trial, madame," he burst in furiously. He raised his voice for the first time, thundering out the words and dashing his clenched fist on the table, his dark eyes flashing with rage. "By heaven, I say you must answer, and you shall!"

But this outburst had far less terrifying effect on Stephanie than his former cold, con-

centrated, suppressed passion. She rose and met his look scornfully.

"You forget yourself, Prince Lepova, and make me almost regret that I have used my influence to further your cause."

Considering that she was steeped to the eyes in treachery, it was a magnificent piece of bluff; but he was too shrewd to be imposed upon by it.

"You will see the only construction your silence bears," he said, reverting to his colder tone.

"I see only that your presence while in this mood, Prince Lepova, is an insult to me." Her tone was an excellent assumption of haughty, deeply injured pride.

"For the present I will relieve you of it, then," he replied. "In anticipation of this trouble, I have called together the leaders, and this matter will be submitted to them." Then, turning to me, but obviously speaking at Stephanie, he added: "Of course, no one can leave the house in the meantime."

He fired that as a parting shot, and left the room hurriedly.

Stephanie lost not a moment in making her intentions clear.

"He has gone to bring others to hear my answer," she said directly. "What am I to say?"

"So far as I am concerned, what you will. I will be Gerard Provost no longer, come what may. I ought to have known the value of a Bosnian noble's honour."

"You persist that you are not Provost?"

Normia looked up in surprise, and glanced at us both.

"You know that I am not. Why this pretence?"

"The pretence is yours," she cried, with a flash of anger. "Retract this story, and, as my affianced husband, no one will dare to touch you. Persist in it, and they will treat you as a spy."

"This farce is intended only to mislead Normia. Put an end to it, please."

"I am not misled, Mr. Pershore," said Normia, with a smile which delighted me as much as it enraged Stephanie, who turned on her.

"You wish him to be murdered, then?" she cried viciously.

Normia drew herself up to her full height, paused, and with a look of intense scorn, said, with slow cutting contempt, "It would be a better fate for an honourable man than life as the husband of a woman so false as you, Baroness Dolgoroff."

"Yet he was affianced to me!"

"If I know Mr. Pershore, it was as the preface, not of marriage, but of death."

At this the last vestige of Stephanie's self-control took flight.

"He is worthy of your championship, indeed. His hand is red with the blood of Provost, whom he murdered, and he offers it to you."

"So at last you admit that he is Mr. Pershore," replied Normia calmly. And to me: "Mr. Pershore, I beg your forgiveness for having ever been persuaded to doubt you."

"His lips are wet with the kisses of your serving wench, Catarina, and he would press them to yours," was Stephanie's next venomous insinuation.

"Your malice is becoming mere stupidity, Baroness," returned Normia, coldly. "Even to ask you to deny that, Guy, would be an insult;" and she offered me her hand.

"On my honour, Normia," I declared, as I pressed my lips to it.

If ever the light of murder shone in a woman's eyes it was in Stephanie's then as she stood watching us, trembling with passion, her bosom heaving and her nostrils dilated with her quickly-drawn breath.

She edged back slowly, and her hand stole out to a drawer in a bureau behind her. I guessed her intention. She had some weapon there. But apparently she could not find what she sought, and I saw a change of intention come over her angry face.

She came back to her former position, and said to Normia, her voice thick with passion: "I have my answer ready for the Prince now. This shall cost you both your lives." And with that she hurried out — obviously to seek Lepova.

Instinctively I opened my arms.

"Normia!"

With a low cry of delight she let me draw her to my heart, and our lips met.

"Ah, Guy, can you ever forgive me?"

"I have never blamed you, sweetheart. You could not know," I whispered.

"What will they do to us?"

"They cannot kill our love, dearest," and our lips met again.

"I do not care—now," she whispered, tenderly, as she lifted her eyes radiant with the light of love to mine. "I have never feared for myself. I can face even death happily now."

"No, no. We will talk of facing it when it comes. Life is all sweet now with promise for us both."

Remembering Stephanie's stealthy attempt to get a weapon, I went to the drawer in the bureau. I had something to fight for now, indeed, and if I could get a revolver, I would at least sell our lives dearly.

But only disappointment resulted. The drawer was empty!

I stood staring blankly at it, and cursing myself for my folly in having come to the house unarmed.

Normia, in wonderment, crept to my side and put her hand on my arm.

As we stood thus in silence the noise of confused murmurs and disorder in the house below reached our ears. The voices of men raised in angry altercation, and the sound of scurrying footsteps.

A moment later we heard rapid steps approaching the room.

"They are coming, Guy," said Normia.

"Are there any means of escape that way?" I asked, pointing to a door at the opposite end of the room.

"None that I know. Those are the Baroness's private apartments only."

"Thank heaven, they cannot harm you," I whispered, not believing what I said, however.

"I do not fear for myself, Guy. But I have brought you to this."

"Courage, dearest, and hope," I murmured. But my own words mocked me. There was no hope.

"I am not afraid."

Indeed, her coolness was wonderful. She was as calm and as self-collected as a veteran. Of the two it was I who was the coward.

The clamour below seemed to increase. In those desperate circumstances a terrifying sound. My knowledge of her peril and my helplessness to avert it made me indeed a coward.

And, when the steps were close to the room, a very paralysis of panic seized me, and I could do nothing but stare fatuously at the door, waiting for it to open to admit the men whose coming meant death to us both.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE OPENING SKIRMISH.

ONLY once before in my life had I known such acute suspense as during the moments when Normia and I stood waiting for the entrance of Prince Lepova and his companions. That had been on the night of Provost's murder, as I waited for the entrance of Arnheim and the other two.

I was almost as scared as a child; and when the handle of the door was turned, I caught my breath and felt a chill of sweat break out on my forehead. A pause followed, as though the man's attention were distracted for the moment and his entrance delayed. Then the door was thrust open violently.

But it was Stephanie who entered, not the Prince; and in place of the threatening anger in which she had left us, she was now wild and distraught with agitation, and her face was white to the lips with fear.

"All is lost!" she cried, despairingly. "It is your doing. You have ruined us all. Some arrests have already been made, and they accuse me of treachery. The Prince has all the leaders here, and we are to go before them. They will kill me. They will kill me. Oh God! Oh God! I cannot die!" and she

flung herself headlong on a couch, a prey to overwhelming and utterly abject terror.

The sight of her fear made me ashamed of mine. I crossed to her and laid my hand on her shoulder.

"Tell me what has happened. Come, this will do no good."

She shuddered and quivered, shaking like one in an ague.

"They will kill me! They will kill me!" she moaned over and over again.

"You won't escape by giving way in that fashion," I said brusquely, for the sight of her cowardly fear for herself disgusted me. She had terrorised others readily enough and had glibly placed their lives in peril.

"There is no escape. We are trapped. Every way out of the house is blocked. They will kill me. There is no escape;" and again she gave the reins to her panic.

Normia, on the other hand, was as calm as Stephanie was terror-stricken, and witnessed the breakdown with contemptuous surprise.

"I could not have believed she was such a coward," she said. "I will go and find out what has occurred."

"No, no, you had better not," I protested.

"They will not harm me. Besides, if they mean to, one place is as good as another. Here we are only in a trap, as she says."

"How many rooms are there?" I asked, pointing to Stephanie's apartments.

"Three—boudoir, bedroom, and dressing-room beyond."

"How are the rooms reached—I mean from outside?"

"A corridor runs along that side of them all, and there is a door into each of the two first rooms. The third, the dressing-room, is entered only from the bedroom." She answered me without a sign of agitation.

"If we had a weapon of any kind we could hold that room against them until some sort of assistance comes, or until we could try an escape in the dark. Have you no weapons?" I asked Stephanie. "For heaven's sake, rouse yourself."

"No, no. I have nothing. There is no hope, no escape, I tell you."

I ran through to look at the dressing-room, and found it the best for our purpose. As Normia had said, it had but one door, which led from the bedroom, and one window, with a small balcony, just the width of the window itself. If I had not been such a fool as to come unarmed, I could have held it against a dozen men, since they could only have entered it one at a time. But, even as it was, it was safer for us than the bigger rooms, with their two or three doors, by which entrance could be forced simultaneously by different parties.

I had my plan in a moment—to barricade the door of the room so as to allow of no more than one man entering at once, and hold the entrance with some heavy weapon. I was hunting around for something that would serve my purpose, when Normia called me.

"I have a plan, Guy," she said. "I have been listening, and all is much quieter in the

house. Probably she has much exaggerated things in her terror. Let me go and find Prince Lepova. If I can induce him to return, we may find a way for you to escape, or, at worst, keep him here as a kind of hostage."

It was a shrewd thought, but too dangerous.

"He would not let you return here, and heaven alone knows what they would do to you," I said.

"I have done nothing. They will not harm me. And I have many friends in the house. Let me go, please," she urged.

But even as I hesitated we heard someone coming to the room. Stephanie heard it also, and sprang up with a cry of fear and rushed away, just as Lepova entered. He was accompanied, to my surprise and relief, by but one man. I did not know him, but the revolver he carried, with a clumsy and ineffectual attempt at concealment, sufficed to show the intentions of the pair.

Lepova's face was as heavy as a thundercloud, and it is scarcely an exaggerated simile to say that his glance was like a gleam of lightning as he flashed his eyes round the room.

"Where is Baroness Dolgoroff?"

"She has gone into the room beyond," said Normia, and pointed to the door.

"Are you armed?" he demanded of me.

"No. I came here relying on your pledge. Why do you ask?"

His reply was to glance at the other man, who levelled his revolver at me. "You are a prisoner, of course," he said sternly.

"What is the meaning of this, Prince Lepova?" asked Normia.

"There is treachery somewhere—we are finding out where. You will have to answer to the leaders below, and will have a chance to clear yourself, if you can," he said to me, as I was turning out my pockets at the other man's bidding.

"I will answer for Mr. Pershore, Prince," declared Normia.

"You have yet to answer for yourself," was the reply, very harshly spoken, as he went to the door of the boudoir and called to Stephanie.

I shall never forget Normia's cool quick-wittedness at that crisis. She seemed to read my thoughts in the one swift glance that passed between us.

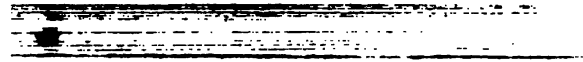
"She has gone to her bedroom, Prince, the room beyond," she said, as calmly as if the position were one of the most ordinary every-day character. "Shall I tell her?" and she went toward him.

"No. Stay here, if you please," he snapped, and went alone through the door.

He was evidently accustomed to regard her as a negligible quantity, and made no allowance for the change in her which my news had wrought. She turned back with a careless shrug of the shoulders and a smile, walked leisurely to a lounge chair, which stood close to the man who was covering me, and picked up the cushion and shook it up as if about to sit down. Then, with another swift meaning glance at me, she swung the cushion at him sideways.

"THE NEXT INSTANT HE WAS ON HIS BACK . . . AND MY REVOLVER AT HIS HEAD."

(*Page 295.*)



The next moment his revolver was in my hands instead of his, and, snatching up a heavy bronze figure, I dealt him a blow on the head, which felled him and knocked all the consciousness out of him.

The groan he gave and the noise of the fall were heard by the Prince.

"What's that?" he called from the inner room.

"Your man's had a fit, or something, you'd better come," I replied, and I bent over the man as if to see what was the matter.

Lepova had drawn his weapon at the noise of the fall, and it was in his hand as he came hurrying out.

"Poor fellow! What is it?" exclaimed Normia, with excellently assumed sympathy in her tone and not a trace of excitement.

This, together with my attitude, quieted the Prince's suspicions. He put his revolver in his pocket and came to my side and bent down. A second later he was on his back with my knee on his stomach and my revolver at his head.

"If you want to live, keep quiet," I said sternly. "I swear to heaven that if you resist or make a sound I'll fire. You've broken your oath, you know, and sought my life."

Then I took his pistol from him, and satisfied myself that he had no other weapons. He had been taken entirely by surprise, and, reading in my look that I meant mischief, saw that resistance was hopeless at that juncture. At any rate, he offered none.

"Lock the big doors, Normia. We shall

have some of the others up directly to know what is keeping these two. Then go and find the Baroness. We must get to that inner room. Quick. Call to me when the way is clear."

She did it all very quietly and quickly. And when she called to me I let Lepova get up, keeping his head covered by my pistol all the time.

"Now, Prince, we'll have a plain talk. You got me here with a lie, and meant all the time to have my life."

"No. I merely wanted an explanation."

"Well, you're going to have it now. It's this. Your life is safe, so long as ours are safe —and not one second longer. You've had a proof of what I can do with a pistol, and now that I have yours and this man's, you'll know I mean to put up a fight."

He was very cool, and there was no question about his courage, but he recognised he had no chance.

"You can shoot me, if you will. I can't resist, but that will not save you."

"I mean to do better than shoot you, unless you drive me to do it by trying to fool me. I mean to hold you as an hostage for our safety."

"Are you in truth the Englishman, Mr. Pershore?"

"Yes, and a good many degrees more dangerous to you than Provost the spy."

"Will you pledge your honour not to reveal anything you have found out here?"

"A little late to suggest terms, isn't it?"

"You are not out of the house," he replied,

meaningly. "But if you will give that pledge and also surrender the Baroness Dolgoroff, you may go free."

"Didn't you hear me say I was an Englishman? Well, we English don't betray women into the hands of such men as you."

"She shall not go," he answered, his face set with anger and resolve.

"That's your last word?"

"Yes, absolutely. Come what may she shall not escape."

"Then we'll wait and see what the rest say. Just walk ahead of me into that room there. No tricks, mind."

I was anxious to see whether he would try any attempt to fool me, or whether he was really convinced of my earnestness. It is a nasty experience to have to turn your back on a man who is threatening you with death, but he did not even so much as glance round. We went right through to the dressing-room, where Normia and Stephanie were waiting.

Now that her fear of immediate death had passed, Stephanie's terror had given place to rage, and the instant the Prince entered she broke out into a furious tirade against him, until I stopped her and told her, pretty bluntly, to hold her tongue.

Normia, meanwhile, had anticipated that I should need something with which to bind Lepova, and had found some silken cords, thin but very strong, which exactly suited the purpose. With these I tied his hands behind him and then fastened his legs. He bore it all with the same inflexible coolness.

Next, I went back to the fellow in the reception-room and treated him much in the same fashion, but I gagged him in addition, and then hauled him through into the bedroom, bundled him into a cupboard, and turned the key on him.

I did not know how many men there might be in the house, but he at any rate should not be found in the fighting line against us.

Then someone knocked at the door of the big room.

"Monsieur le Prince! Monsieur le Prince!" came a call.

"You will answer that call, Prince," I said, and slipping the cords off his legs, took him back to the door.

"Tell them not to disturb you, and that you'll call when you need them."

He hesitated, and shook his head.

"You can take your choice," I whispered, grimly and threateningly.

"M. le Prince! M. le Prince!" came the call again, more impatiently.

"I give you five seconds," I growled.

He yielded, but the sweat was in great beads on his forehead.

"What is the matter? I can't be disturbed. I will call you presently," he replied.

I heard the murmur of their voices, and then footsteps as they went away.

He went back to the dressing-room, and I set about making such preparations as I could for the struggle that I knew must come sooner or later.

Now that I had the revolvers, I was fairly

confident that I could hold the room until dark, when I meant either to attempt an escape by means of the window or to employ vigorous methods to bring the police to the house. Normia suggested the latter plan. It was to bring into our room everything smashable and throw it out of the window in the dark, when the streets were quiet.

The window was about twenty feet from the ground: too far to jump: and, unfortunately, it looked out upon a portion of the grounds. But the noise of the crash which we could make was likely to be heard for some distance, and so to attract attention.

When we had done that, I bent all my efforts upon piling and wedging the furniture against the door, so that only one man could enter at a time, and as I had two revolvers, each loaded in six chambers, there was little fear that an entrance could be forced that way.

Lepova watched my preparations in sullen silence and with growing uneasiness, but he made no attempt to escape. At the same time, I was careful to examine his cords every now and then, lest he should succeed in working them loose, and I always put him in such a position that I was between him and the door. Neither he nor I spoke to one another.

Very little was said by any of us, indeed, except as Normia and I discussed our plans. Stephanie sulked, and sat silent in a corner of the room, watching Normia and me with looks of sullen anger.

Although I had worked hard and made the utmost use of the time, there were signs that

the men were getting restless. I heard them in the corridor outside the rooms. The handles of the doors were tried stealthily, and now and then the murmur of voices reached us. I had, of course, locked and bolted the doors and pushed some heavy furniture against them as a sort of rough barricade, but I did not attach much importance to them. Even if they were beaten in, the dressing-room, our "fortress," could still be held.

When the preparations were completed I told Normia the idea of attempting an escape by the window, and set her to tear up the sheets and blankets from Stephanie's bed and twist the strips into a rope. While she was busy with this a loud knocking at the big folding doors told us that the patience of the men had given out.

I tried the same ruse as before, but it failed. Those outside declared they would only be satisfied if the Prince opened the door himself, in proof that all was well with him.

I was prepared for this result, and when the first blows came, indicating that the doors were to be battered in, I took him back to the door of the "fortress," tied up his legs again, and placed him so that he should be in full sight of his friends the instant they entered. I stood behind him, with my drawn revolver.

"You'd better understand, Prince," I said, with intense earnestness, "that your life depends on what your men do. You can tell them what you please, but if they attempt to rescue you or to get in here, it will be your death sentence."

I meant it, every syllable. And he knew it. He had broken faith with me, and I was fighting for Normia's safety as well as my own life. I was all averse from shedding blood deliberately, but I was desperate. I knew, too, that I could do nothing which would so convince the followers that I was utterly reckless as to shoot the leader.

We had not long to wait. A few minutes elapsed, and then a big crash and splintering of wood proclaimed that they had rushed the doors. They came quickly across the big room and through the boudoir, only to halt with cries of anger and confusion at the door of the bedroom on seeing Lepova's plight.

In the midst of the medley a shot was fired, and then I saw one of the men at the front in the act of aiming at me. Quick as light I fired, and he fell back into the arms of a man behind him, as his revolver dropped on the floor in front.

"My next shot will be for the Prince," I cried, in a ringing tone, and at that they hung back and huddled together like a flock of startled sheep.

"What does it mean, Prince?" called one of them.

"That I am a prisoner, as you see, and this man has sworn to take my life if you attempt a rescue," answered Lepova promptly. "You can tell whether he means what he says by the death of Veloskov, there."

"What are we to do?"

"Best go away. The room is barricaded,

so that only one can enter at a time, and he will shoot each man as he comes."

They turned and held a conference, and presently one of them stooped forward to recover the fallen revolver.

"Leave that!" I called.

But he would not. With a snatch he grasped it, only to drop it again instantly, with a cry of pain as I fired and broke his arm. I could well afford one cartridge to secure half-a-dozen more.

It was the last argument they needed, and, without showing their faces again, they turned and went off in a body.

The honours of the opening skirmish were distinctly with me. I had increased my ammunition by fifty per cent., had put two of the enemy out of the fight, and had filled every man of them with a wholesome belief in my capacity to shoot straight.

A heavy gain under the circumstances.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ASSAULT IN FORCE.

THE effect was seen at once. As soon as I had picked up the third revolver the Prince opened negotiations for a truce.

"Can't we come to terms, Mr. Pershore? What is it you want?" he asked.

"To get out of here in safety—all three of us."

"You are at liberty to go. I'll answer for my followers."

I smiled. "Thank you, but who is to answer for you?"

"I pledge my honour."

"I trusted to that before. I can't trust you. I'm not saying this merely to insult you, but nothing you can say will induce me to do it again."

"But there must be some means. I'll do anything you wish."

"Yes, there's one way. There is someone to whom I could write, and he'd send and get me out promptly enough."

"Do you mean the police?"

"Much the same thing—but soldiers, probably."

"I should be mad to do it."

"No. Your people can clear out, and I'll explain your presence plausibly."

He thought it over, frowning heavily.

"It would be the same thing if the house were cleared," he said next.

"Yes. If?" and I shook my head.

"But this sort of thing can't go on for ever," he exclaimed testily.

"I mean to bring the police here myself as soon as it's dark, and my report then will be awkward for you. You planned my murder, you know."

"No, no, no," he protested, and after a pause: "If your letter is sent will you promise to keep secret everything concerning matters here?"

"How can I? The facts must be told about Normia. It is as much to me to clear her from the danger into which you two have forced her as it is to get away from here."

"You are unreasonable," he retorted, very angrily.

"Let the others decide it, then," I said.

"Not the Baroness," he declared, grimly. "She shall answer for her treachery."

Stephanie broke her long silence with a burst of indignant repudiation of the charge of treachery, but he silenced her at once.

"You lie!" he cried fiercely, and then it came out that he knew of Count Kassler's visits and of her attempted betrayal of Normia.

But Normia sided with me.

"Whether she has done this or not, we cannot leave here without her," she declared firmly.

"You two are giving your lives for one who has done her utmost against you both," was the Prince's reply.

"You are giving yours in the futile effort to punish her," I said. "But the matter is settled. You can arrange for us all three to leave in safety, or none."

"She shall not escape," he growled vindictively; and the discussion ended.

Normia and I crossed and sat by the window. It was growing dark, and I was beginning to be impatient for the time to come for our attempt to attract help from outside.

"I am glad you would not desert her, Guy," she whispered. "Do you think what the Prince said about her is true?"

"I know it. I recognised the count yesterday."

"It is horrible—but we couldn't leave her here. What do you think the men will do next?"

"You've set them a pretty stiff problem, Normia."

"I?"

"It was your idea to make Lepova a hostage. While we can keep him it's difficult to see what they can do. Otherwise, they would concoct some plan to carry the place with a rush, probably."

"But you won't really kill him, Guy?" she asked, in a tone of dismay.

"Would you rather that he killed us? This is no kid-glove business. If we are to get out, it won't be by polite methods."

"I can't bear the thought of your killing him. Let me go and try to persuade him to let us all go."

"Why, of course. And you can remind

him that he will have plenty of opportunity of getting even with her afterwards."

She crossed to him, and the two sat talking eagerly for a long time. Then she returned with a smile.

"He has given way," she announced. "I am going down to the others to tell them."

I shook my head.

"The net is too obvious, Normia. At present we have the hostage, but then they would have a more valuable one. He knows that well enough. I would not trust myself, and certainly not you, among those brutes without a strong escort. If he is in earnest—which I don't believe—he must find someone to carry a letter."

And thus these further negotiations had no result except to increase my distrust of Lepova.

More than an hour had passed in this way, and all the time the men had given no sign or sound of an intention to renew the attack. Before it was quite dark I shut and barricaded the door, and Normia and I discussed the attempt to bring the police to the house.

"It is the back of the house, Guy, remember, and very far from the street where any police will be."

"Sounds travel well at night."

"I should not build too much upon it," she answered. "I don't wish to dash your hopes, you know that, but I don't want you to be too disappointed if the attempt should fail."

"Your courage is wonderful, Normia," I cried.

"What is that?" she asked, with a start, as we heard movements in the room above.

We listened intently. Men tramped about the room, and then began to move the furniture. Hammering followed, and a noise like the ripping up of planks.

Directly afterwards Stephanie cried out in alarm, as heavy blows were struck against the ceiling of the room below, setting the floor trembling and shaking with the concussion.

"They are going to break a way through from above and below," said Normia instantly. Nothing appeared able to shake her coolness.

"It sounds like it," I agreed. "We'll give them something else to think about, but I wish they had waited a bit later. We'll send out our signals of distress, Normia."

It was already dark enough for the purpose, although too early in the evening. I had intended to wait until the city was quiet, but the form of the new attack rendered me too uneasy to wait longer.

I opened the window, and as Normia handed me some large glass and china ornaments and some pictures I dashed them to the ground, and at the same time sent up loud shouts for the police at the top of my lung power.

At the first crash the hammering ceased, and the rush of footsteps told us that we had, at any rate, created a diversion.

I continued to hurl the things out, and sent up another shout for the police; but the response was not at all what I had looked for. Someone fired from below, and the bullet whizzed past my head as I stood on the little

balcony, and struck the wall just behind me. This drove me in, of course; indeed, Normia caught hold of my arm and pulled me back.

And that was the only result of the attempt. Standing inside out of range of those below, I continued to throw out everything that was breakable or likely to make a noise; and the clattering, smashing din seemed enough to have raised the dead. But nothing came of it except that the work of breaking into the room was delayed for the time.

My disappointment was keen and searching. I had counted so surely upon attracting attention, and bringing help to us, that the failure forced home the fear that I had altogether under-estimated the peril of our position.

We must get help from the outside or there could be only one end to the struggle. From over-hopefulness my mood changed to exaggerated dread. I saw all that could happen to us in a black light. We could not hold out indefinitely. There must come a time when we should have to yield. Even if the men opposed to us did nothing, we should be starved out; while if they managed to attack us, and carried out this plan of breaking in simultaneously from above and below, we should be beaten that way.

Normia saw how deep was my disappointment.

"It has had one good result, Guy," she said, cheerfully; "it has stopped the other preparations." Then she slipped her hand into mine, and added in a whisper: "I am so sorry."

"It makes a difference, of course; but we still have the hostage, thanks to you."

"I am sure you will get us out," she declared, with absolute confidence.

Lepova also understood the significance of the failure, and, while disposed to rejoice at it, perceived also how it might affect him.

"You see, you cannot get help from outside, Mr. Pershore."

"It may prove awkward for you, too, Prince," I returned, curtly.

"It is still open for you and Normia to leave."

"Guy!" cried Stephanie, quick to take alarm.

"I understand the use of that name, Baroness," put in Lepova, testily.

"We all go, or all stay. I have no other answer."

"You must see you have no hope of escape."

"I don't see it yet. It depends on how many of these brutes of yours are ready to lose their lives, and whether they are resolved to force me to take yours. And, now, if you have nothing else but a cowardly betrayal to propose, keep silent. I am in no mood for such talk."

I had indeed a perplexing problem to solve. It was not difficult to guess at the men's plans. The capture of Lepova had made things very complicated for them, and they had waited for the darkness to try and take us by surprise. Their idea was to render it possible to enter the room from two or three points at once—

from below, by the door, and probably by the window, while from the hole in the ceiling they would command the whole room and so be able to fire at me while I was engaged in the fight with those who entered.

My first consideration was, therefore, to find a spot where Normia and Stephanie would be unseen by them and out of the way of stray bullets. This was fortunately easy enough. Close to the window was a cupboard. in which the two would be concealed and at the same time able to keep some sort of watch against a surprise by the window.

I told Normia this part of my plan, and showed her where she must station herself and keep watch.

"Can you use a revolver?" I asked her.

"Unfortunately, no. But, if I could, I can see nothing except that the darkness is a little less dense than it was just now."

"Then you must trust your ears, and, if you see or hear anything, just call 'Guy!' No more; I shall understand. We'll have the window up. If they go on with that hole up there we shall have a cloud of dust down when the ceiling falls thick enough to choke us."

I threw the sash up, and from her post she peered out into the night. "I can't see much," she declared, a little dolefully.

"Try to concentrate all your thoughts on watching that balcony, and, as you crouch there, look for some spot where the background to your line of sight is a little less dark than the rest, so that a man's shadow would show darker between it and you. There's a white build-

ing across there. Force your eyes and they'll soon obey you."

"Can you see in the dark?" she asked in surprise.

"Fairly. A habit I learned at sea and in night hunting."

She soon picked up my meaning, and was testing her eyes, when the work above and below us was resumed with great vigour.

The hammering enabled me to locate the probable position of both openings; and I selected a spot, close to the door, from which I could command both that and the opening from below.

I tied Lepova securely to the chair on which he sat, and fastened a cloak round him long enough for its folds to cover me as I crouched beside him.

From my post I could shoot anyone who ventured up from below or entered by the door. But as I waited it occurred to me that I could save some of my ammunition if I had something that would serve as a club. I hunted round, therefore, and found a heavy bronze statuette, which I had brought from one of the other rooms with the intention of flinging it with the rest of the things out of the window.

A blow with that on a man's head would be as effective for my purpose as a bullet, given the time to use it; and every cartridge I had was more precious than gold.

There was one weak spot in our defences—the window. But I was, nevertheless, pretty confident of success in beating off the attack. I had one advantage, which would more than

counterbalance the weakness. The darkness which would baffle and hinder our assailants was but little hindrance to me. I could see across the room quite well enough to make sure of sending a bullet home. And I was fully resolved to fire every shot to kill.

There was another point in my favour. I did not, of course, know how many men were engaged in the attack upon us; but judged that there were not likely to be more than a dozen. To make such an attack as they were planning necessitated their splitting themselves up into small parties, and, unless they timed the simultaneous entrances exactly—an extremely difficult task under such conditions—I should be able to deal with each in turn.

The work above was the first to be finished. Down came a large square of the ceiling right on to Lepova, completely covering him with white, and sending up a suffocating cloud of dust, through which the light in the room above showed. Taking advantage of this, one of the men above tried to catch a glimpse of our room. Either that, or else he had been caught by surprise by the fall of the ceiling.

I saw him, and fired instantly. There was a groan; the light was extinguished; the body was dragged away; and I heard the footsteps of one man as he hurried out of the room.

The work below continued uninterrupted, and, at the same time, some heavy blows were struck at our door, to break it in.

Almost at the same moment Normia called my name quickly—the agreed signal that someone was entering by the window.

Matters had gone very much as I had hoped. The plan for the simultaneous attack had missed; and, as I had driven away the men who were to have attacked me from above, I could safely cross the room and tackle those at the window.

In a moment I was across the room, and reached the window just as a man set his foot to climb on to the balcony from the ladder.

It was Alexandrov, the Greek. I levelled my revolver; but there was no need to shoot. His position placed him at my mercy. A blow was enough, and just as I struck him he recognised me. He threw up his hands, uttered a fierce oath, lost his balance, and, with a piercing scream, fell backwards to the ground. I heard the sickening thud of his fall.

At the same time our door was broken in, and my barricade was thrust on one side and sent toppling down, and the floor boards in the centre of the room were smashed upwards from below.

The noise and racket were deafening, and Stephanie screamed.

As I rushed back to my post I heard the men return to the room above, and it was plain that the attack was about to open in force.

I crouched down behind Lepova, expectant and confident, both eyes and ears strained to the uttermost, as I waited for my first need to shoot.

CHAPTER XXVII.

STEPHANIE'S LAST TREACHERY.

A PAUSE followed the breaking-in of the door, and in it I caught the shuffling of feet outside. I guessed they were waiting for some signal. Then a ladder was pushed up through the opening from below, and someone began to climb, and at the same moment Normia called to me again.

They were timing matters better now. I had to let the window attack take its chance. To have crossed the room now would have drawn on me the fire of those above, while at the same time leaving the more dangerous places unguarded.

But it decided me to run a risk. Lying at full length, I peered down at the fellow who was on the ladder, fired at him rapidly, and was back under cover of Lepova before the man above could have time to hit.

My shot was the signal for those waiting at the door to rush in; but the luck was all with me. One of the chairs which I had used for the impromptu barricade had fallen right in the entrance, and over this the first-comer fell sprawling, close to my side. The second man did not get as far. A bullet from my revolver stopped him, and, snatching up the bronze

figure, I smashed it down on the first man's head with a force that stunned him.

"Curse the darkness!" growled a voice in the doorway. I caught sight of the speaker, as he stood hesitating, fired, and hit him somewhere, for he went off groaning and cursing volubly.

This shot drew the fire from above. Three or four shots came as fast as the man could pull the trigger. But I was safe under cover of Lepova's chair.

That the Prince was not hit was little short of a miracle.

"Are you mad?" he shouted fiercely. "You are firing at me." And with that the attack ended; for the fellow who had entered by the window, perceiving how things had gone, turned tail and bolted.

"Are you hurt, Guy?" came Normia's voice through the darkness, anxiously.

"Not a scratch," I replied. But I was breathless with the exertion and excitement of the fight, and now that the tension was relaxed I realised how much we owed to luck. But for the fact that the rush had been so ragged and mistimed, nothing could possibly have saved us. It was a case of a good plan spoiled in the execution. And I was profoundly thankful.

As it was, the men had had a lesson and weakened their numbers to such an extent that I doubted whether they would venture on another attack.

"You'll admit, now, that we are not likely to be taken," I said to Lepova. "Will you end this and arrange for us to leave?"

"Normia and you—yes."

"I mean the three of us."

"No," he replied, with the same dogged vindictiveness against Stephanie he had shown throughout. "You have beaten off this attack, but there can be only one end to it. You can't hold out against time."

"It's your life as well as ours," I reminded him.

"My life is nothing compared with her punishment."

And to this decision he held inflexibly.

But what he said was true. We could not hold out indefinitely. Even if no further attempt were made during the night, the light would render our position much more precarious.

The darkness had proved our friend, but when the daylight came a couple of men posted at the gap overhead would have us all at their mercy. A single movement anywhere by any of us would draw their fire, and even if we had twenty lives each they could all be taken at leisure.

And there were absolutely no means of meeting the danger. I could not, of course, cover up the gap, and there was nothing in the room I could use even partly to obstruct their view. They had but to wait for the dawn, when we should be absolutely defenceless.

In a word, it was a sheer impossibility for us to remain where we were.

Yet how were we to get out?

I had thought, in the first instance, of escaping by the window; but, in view of the fact

that that had been used to get at us, I abandoned the idea. To hope to get away by the Reception Chamber and the main staircase was equally futile. It would be but to walk into the arms of the "enemy."

There remained only the two openings which the men had made. And then I began to get the glimmering of a plan.

I might safely reckon on the probability that the men were just as alive as I was to the advantage which the daylight would give them. They had learnt the risks of attacking us in the dark, and I judged that they would now calculate they had us safe in a trap from which escape was impossible.

I set about confirming this impression upon Lepova at once, therefore, lest he should see what we were about to do and raise the alarm. Indeed, I designed to use him for that very purpose—but it should be a false alarm.

I replaced the barricade at the door as best I could, and the noise I made brought someone to the room below.

"Is all well with you, Prince?"

"Never mind about me. You have only to wait until daylight——"

"Silence!" I burst in, fiercely.

"We have thought of that, and are watching," came the reply.

There was a whispered conversation below, and then one man walked away.

I stole across to Normia and Stephanie, and held a conference. I told them that it was not possible for us to remain in the room after dawn, and that any spot in the house would be

safer than where we were. Stephanie knew the house well, and explained that if we could get to the floor below she could guide us to a side door by which we could escape from the house.

I then explained my plan. It was very simple; but if we played up to it well, as likely to succeed as any more elaborate one. It was to mislead the men into the belief that we intended to escape to the upper floor, to cause Lepova to share that belief, and to trick him into giving an alarm of our intention to his followers, and so draw away the men from the lower part of the house.

Still speaking in whispers, but gradually raising my voice, I put some questions to Stephanie about the upper floors of the house, and whether we could get to any room at the front from which we could attract the attention of people in the street.

Having made sure that he had heard this, I returned to my place behind him and told him that I had resolved to risk an attempt to escape by the room below, and I swore that if he attempted to give a sound of warning I would blow his brains out. I forced him to take an oath to keep silence, and made much of this part of the business, and finished it by fastening a gag in his mouth. But I took care to do this clumsily, so that he could work it sufficiently loose to be able to shout when I wanted him to shout.

Next, I made noise enough to bring the men running back to the room below, and then called to Normia and Stephanie to be ready.

The man whose head I had broken in the

mêlée was now showing signs of returning consciousness, so I hauled him to the mouth of the opening and toppled him headlong down among his friends who were clustered at the bottom.

I had seen that Lepova was observing me closely, and, being aware, as he thought, of my real intention, was wriggling and grimacing to free himself from the gag so that he could shout a warning. I had given him time to do this, indeed.

The instant I heard the man fall to the floor below I seized the ladder, a very light one fortunately, and dragged it up to the room.

"Now, Normia, up at once," I cried, as I placed it at the opening overhead. She ran to it and set her foot on the first rung, when Lepova cried out with all the force of his powerful lungs:

"They are escaping to the top room. Quick! Quick!"

"You treacherous devil! you overheard us!" I thundered; and, calculating that a little touch of realism was worth a cartridge, I fired my revolver in the air, as if I had shot him.

"Never mind me! Quick! Quick!" he called, thus rendering us invaluable aid.

There was a stampede from the room below, just as I had calculated, and, as soon as the coast was clear, I slipped the ladder back to its old place.

"Follow me quickly, for God's sake," I whispered to Normia, as I got on the ladder and slid down.

But we were not out of the wood yet. As I neared the bottom, there was a muttered oath

out of the darkness, I felt the burning stab of a knife in my back, and before I could get my feet a man gripped me and began shouting at the top of his voice to the rest to come back.

Maddened with rage and pain, and utterly desperate, I grappled him, and down we went headlong. By good fortune I got my hand on his throat and managed to stop his shouts; and we rolled and tumbled and struggled about the floor, upsetting everything in our way, and bruising ourselves at every turn. Fortunately, I was much the stronger of the two, and at last succeeded in getting my right hand free, when I brought down the butt end of my revolver with crashing force on his face, and a second time on his head.

Bruised, breathless, and rather dizzy as the result of the struggle, I scrambled up to find both Normia and Stephanie at the foot of the ladder.

Lepova, in the meanwhile, in the room over us, was keeping up a mad racket, drumming his heels on the floor, raving and shouting to the others how we had escaped, and yelling directions to them what to do.

"Lead the way—quick!" I said to Stephanie. "We shall have those devils back on us in a minute."

"You are hurt, Guy," cried Normia.

"No," I lied. I dared not scare them by saying anything about that knife-thrust. "I'm only out of breath. Quick, Stephanie."

But she had lost her head, and stood staring about her like a dazed rabbit. "I can't think

for the moment just where we are," she muttered.

"There's no time to think. We must take our chance;" and I made for a door which stood open. It led into a corridor, and as we stood a second on the threshold I heard a noise to the right which I took to be caused by the return of the men who were hunting us.

I ran off to the left, therefore, calling to the others to keep close to me. But I had not gone half-a-dozen yards when, just above our heads, as it seemed, we heard the rapid heavy steps of the men dashing down a staircase right upon us.

The darkness here was profound, and our only hope was that it would shield us. I got the other two past the foot of the stairs—the row that Lepova was keeping up preventing our movements from being heard—and whispering to them to crouch down in the passage, I stood in front of them, jammed flat against the wall, holding my breath as three or four men came racing down.

Without a thought that we were within arm's length of them, they turned in the opposite direction, making for the room we had just left.

The instant they had gone I pulled Normia's arm—she was next to me—and whispered:

"Up the stairs—quick, and as silently as you can."

"Where are you going?" asked Stephanie, who was trembling violently.

"Don't talk," I answered, angrily. "Go!" and I pushed her after Normia and followed.

Not a second too soon.

"Turn up the lights, someone," called a voice, and we were not up the stairs before the whole place below was flooded with the electric light.

"The first room that opens on the front of the house," I said, as we reached the landing above.

Stephanie appeared to recover some of her dazed wits when the light came.

"The third door on the left," she whispered, as she ran past Normia.

The men below were now at fault, like a pack of hounds that had missed the scent. They were running hither and thither, opening door after door, and cursing us volubly. They took it for granted, seemingly, that we should make for one of the back doors to escape from the house. That we had doubled on our tracks did not occur to them.

Just at the head of the staircase, and on our right, was the door of one of Stephanie's rooms, with which our "fortress" room communicated, and as I passed it the key was turned by someone inside.

Then suddenly the electric light was switched on, and at the other end of the corridor another search party appeared, just as Lepova and a companion ran out from the room behind us.

From both parties came loud cries, as they caught sight of us, and shouts to us to surrender.

It was then Stephanie committed an act so base and treacherous that I would not have believed it possible even she would have been guilty of it.

She was already at the door of a room and held it open. I was about a couple of yards behind Normia when she reached the room; and as I was feeling the loss of blood from my wound and the general effects of the struggle, I was moving slowly, and no doubt presented a very sorry appearance.

Stephanie cried out that I was hurt, and as Normia, instead of entering the room, turned and put out a hand as if to help me, Stephanie deliberately pushed her away across the passage, drew me into the room, just as two or three shots were fired, and slammed the door. Such an act of diabolical treachery, that I could have found it in me to strike her.

"You had to be saved, Guy!" she said.

"To blazes with saving me!" I roared savagely; and when she would not loose her hold I dragged her away and sent her staggering back into the room, while I tore the door open.

I had but a second to spare.

The men from the farther end were close up then, and Lepova stood holding Normia and threatening her.

Mad with fury, I struck him with my revolver in the face and, catching hold of Normia, pulled her past me into the room. Lepova made a vain effort to grab her dress, and then, seizing his companion's weapon, fired two shots at me. But, in his excitement, the aim was bad and the bullets went wide.

Then he and his companion hurled themselves at the door to prevent my shutting it, and one of them thrust his foot in as a wedge.

It was no time for scruples, so I fired a shot into the leg and kicked the foot clear of the door.

Meanwhile, Stephanie, either led by curiosity to see the result of her treachery, or meditating some further trick, had crept up behind on my right hand. Lepova caught sight of her, and his revolver flashed out just before I succeeded in slamming and locking the door.

The room was in utter darkness, and, coming straight out of the lighted passage, I could not make out a single object. But I felt about, and, seizing anything and everything I could lay my hands on, piled it up against the door.

"Have the light on a moment, Guy—the switch is by the door," said Normia.

The presence of mind she showed in such a crisis and the manner in which she kept her wits clear, was wonderful to me. I began to feel and fumble about for the switch, and then someone thundered on the panels of the door.

"Open, open! In the name of the Emperor!"

I laughed. The trick was a little too obvious.

The call was repeated, and some heavy blows were struck to break the door down.

Just then I found the switch, and the instant I turned on the light Normia gave a cry of horror.

Stephanie was lying huddled up on the floor, just beyond the crude heap of tables and chairs and things I had piled up as a barricade.

"She must have been hit by that last shot of Lepova's," I said, and I was going to her

when Normia saw the blood which had oozed from the wound in my back.

"Oh, Guy, you are wounded!" she cried, her face as grey as death.

"Only a scratch—don't worry. I can hold out all right."

But it was far from all right, and in that momentary pause from the excitement which had kept me going, I began to feel both weak and dizzy.

"Let me see to it at once. My life depends on it, remember," she said when I protested. But we had no time to settle the point.

With a crash that startled us both the door was broken down. Half-a-dozen men rushed into the room, and we were looking down their levelled muskets.

Normia, like the plucky little soul she was, put herself right between me and the guns, as I sprang up to make a last fight for it.

"Surrender, or we fire!" thundered the man in command of the party.

I gazed at them half stupidly, and then understood.

"We surrender," I said, and tossed my revolver down on the floor with a laugh. "It's all right, Normia. Thank God."

With a sigh of intense relief I fell back on a couch, weak and faint, and with little more than a vague and feeble appreciation of anything except that the struggle was over and had ended in victory.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MURDER CHARGE.

I HAVE no very clear recollection of the order in which things occurred after the door was broken in and Normia and I were made prisoners.

I can recall the feeling of intense thankfulness when I realised that we were in the hands of the soldiers and not of the men who had been hunting us so desperately. But how they had come to the Black House and to what good fortune we owed their opportune arrival at that moment of supreme crisis, I did not even trouble to ask.

So far as Lepova's gang were concerned we were safe; and that was enough for the present.

I was utterly used up. It turned out that I had lost a good deal of blood from the knife-thrust in my shoulder, and as soon as the excitement and strain were over I collapsed. I did not actually faint—I did not lose consciousness, that is—but I lolled on the couch and looked on with a queer detached feeling that nothing mattered; that I was merely a spectator and that the proceedings had no sort of direct concern for me.

Even when Normia was taken out of the room it did not rouse me. I told her I was sure it would all come right; and when someone

came and dressed my wound, and I was carried away I did not bother myself to ask where they were taking me.

My one consuming desire was to rest; and the instant I was placed in a carriage I fell asleep and remember little more until they woke me late in the day, and I found the police at my bedside, waiting to interrogate me.

It is a cowardly thing to catch a man between sleeping and waking and badger him with questions to lead him to incriminate himself; and in order to obtain time to get my thoughts clear, I affected to be dazed and light-headed.

One of the couple by my bed was evidently an official of some importance—a keen-eyed, sandy-haired, long-faced man, with the police manner highly developed. I mean that he made me feel that my guilt was taken for granted, that his questions were intended to show how much he knew, and that every answer I made only served to plunge me deeper into trouble.

"Your name?" was his first question, blunt, peremptory, and threatening.

"Where am I?" I asked, adopting the Scotch tactic of answering one question by asking another.

"Don't bandy words with me. Answer my questions. Your name?"

"Who are you?"

"We are the police. Be careful. Your name?" more curtly even than before.

"Dog, obviously; judging by the way you

speak to me," I retorted, nettled by his offensive manner. "Unless you prefer Pig."

"Name refused," he said to his companion, who sat by with his notebook ready. "Don't suppose this will help you," he added to me. "We have plenty of proofs."

"Then why the devil do you come bothering me?" and with that I settled myself comfortably on my pillow, pulled up the bedclothes, and turned my back on him as if to go off to sleep again. It was obvious that, until I knew something more about the police intentions, my best course was to hold my tongue.

After a moment's hesitation he pulled the bedclothes away roughly. "Sit up at once," he ordered.

I paid no attention. He repeated the order. I snored. He wrenched the pillow from under my head. I breathed heavily as if disturbed, but did not open my eyes, and with a sigh pretended to fall asleep again.

This baffled him for a while. Apparently he knew I was wounded and was afraid to handle me too roughly. "Fetch the doctor," he told his companion.

Some minutes passed, and then the doctor came. The two whispered together and the doctor bent over me. "This gentleman wishes to put some questions to you, and you must rouse yourself," he said, not unkindly; and, placing the pillow gently under my back, raised me to a sitting posture.

"He has spoken to me as if I were a dog or a pig, and I will not reply," I told the doctor.

"You do not understand. You are in the gaol infirmary, a prisoner, and you must answer him. He is a police official."

"What is your name?" asked the official in a less truculent tone.

"What is the charge against me?"

"You are one of the leaders of the Black House conspiracy."

I smiled. This was good news. I had feared the charge concerned Provost's murder. "Is that all?"

"You will find it enough," he replied drily. "Now will you give me your name?"

"No. You are making a grave blunder."

"Who was the young woman found with you at the time of your arrest?"

"I decline to say."

"You two had killed another woman who was found in the same room shot. Who was she?"

"I decline to answer. We had nothing to do with her death."

"Give me the names of your chief associates in the conspiracy?"

I declined to reply again; and he went on to badger me with many questions, to all of which I made much the same reply. As he made no reference to the murder of Provost, I gathered that he, at any rate, knew nothing of that charge; and to this extent I gained by the cross-examination.

When he had come to the end of his questions and his temper at the same time, he threatened me with many vague penalties as the result of my recalcitrant conduct, and

rose to leave. "Then you refuse to say anything?"

I could gain no more information from him, so I took a different line. "On the contrary, I am going to tell everything I know about the whole affair; but I shall only do so to a friend. You are altogether wrong about me. The friend I speak of is Baron Vodressy; and I wish to communicate with him at once. Let him know that Count Mirkov's secretary has been arrested in mistake and wishes to make a communication to him."

The mention of the Baron's name produced pretty much the effect on the official which I expected. He regarded it as the impertinent bluff of a prisoner whose guilt was a matter of certainty. His smile of cynical superiority told me that.

"You have heard my request, doctor—to communicate at once with Baron Vodressy. I shall wish you to remember it, in case this gentleman refuses to comply with it," I said. "There has been enough blundering already, and my friends will take the proper steps."

The man made no reply to this implied threat; but he evidently thought it best not to disregard it; for the Baron's private secretary visited me later in the day.

To him I dictated a full and detailed account of all I knew; and the result was that an order arrived at the gaol that evening, that I was to be taken to the Baron so soon as I could leave the infirmary.

My wound was not a serious one. The rest had already relieved the inflammation, and

after another long sleep lasting right through the night, I was sufficiently recovered to be able to go to him.

His reception was, however, very chilling; and he at once made it plain that I was in a very ugly mess.

"For your father's sake, Mr. Pershore, I will, of course, do what I can for you; but I cannot conceal from myself that you have acted with great indiscretion; and you will, of course, have to clear yourself from all this tangle just as any ordinary citizen of Vienna would have to do. The instant you found yourself embroiled with these people, you should have come to me, as I told you the other day, and made a clean breast of everything."

"I was bound by my word, sir."

"You were dealing with traitors, Mr. Pershore. You were the Count's secretary; you were actually sent here to investigate this very matter; you had a full knowledge of all who were concerned; and it was your duty to have reported all you knew. However, that is for the Count himself to settle with you."

I couldn't tell him that on Normia's account, even if my pledge had not bound me, it was impossible for me to speak; so I replied something to the effect that I had at any rate helped to break up the conspiracy.

He waved that aside, impatiently. "It was broken up by our men," he replied, testily.

"But on the information I gave you the other day. You must admit that, at any rate," I contended.

"Your information was altogether incom-

plete. What happened was that a servant of Baroness Dolgoroff knew of his mistress's peril and succeeded in escaping from the house during the night, and carried information to a quarter which enabled our people to act."

I knew the quarter, of course: Count Kassler. But I thought it prudent not so say anything about that. "I must face the music, of course," I said. "Will you tell me what happened last night?"

"Certainly. The whole thing is smashed now;" and he went on to say that the raid had been the indirect result of Stephanie's treachery. When she found that she had been discovered, she had told her confidential servant to find Count Kassler and tell him that she was in danger of her life. The servant had contrived to get away, and had found the Count after much delay. A party of police and soldiers had been despatched at once, and they had arrived just as we had broken out of the "fortress" room.

Some of these were the men we had seen at the far end of the corridor when Stephanie, not recognising them, had made that dastardly attempt to shut Normia out from our last place of refuge.

She had paid with her life for that act. In his fury at her betrayal, Lepova had risked capture in order to be revenged. He knew that the men were soldiers sent to save her; and, rather than make his own escape, he had essayed that last frantic attempt to get into the room to kill her. He had found his oppor-

tunity when I had opened the door to save Normia.

"Prince Lepova showed no hesitation in acknowledging all his share in the conspiracy, and admitted that in regard to the Baroness Dolgoroff he was actuated by revenge," concluded Baron Vodressy.

"And in regard to myself—did he say anything?" I asked.

"He confirms all you say as to having been brought into the matter against your will; but that does not touch your action in not having revealed what you knew, Mr. Pershore. You will have to answer for that, yourself."

"And the Princess—Normia?"

"I cannot tell you anything in regard to her," was the uncompromising reply.

"I am very anxious," I urged.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is no concern of mine."

"But you can tell me if she is safe."

"She is in our hands, if that is what you mean. She will, of course, be sent to Belgrade. It is against the Servian Government that she has plotted; and young women who turn conspirators must be prepared to put up with the consequences."

"But she was an unwilling agent all through. I wrote you that. Surely that will be taken into account."

"I am not her judge, Mr. Pershore; but if I were, I should require a great deal of very clear proof before I could accept that view of her conduct."

"Will you help me to get an interview with her?"

He turned a frowning face upon me. "I think you had better devote your time to clearing your own affairs," he said deliberately. "You do not at present appear to appreciate the serious position in which you stand."

His cold, measured tone chilled me. "What is that position?"

"In regard to this man, Provost, whose name you took. You are charged with having killed him in order to pass yourself off as the man himself and so learn the truth about this conspiracy."

"It is monstrous," I cried indignantly.

"You must clear yourself," he said with grim curtness.

"I know the man who did it: Alexandrov, a Greek. He has confessed it to me. He is one of the prisoners taken last night, I expect."

"I will see." He turned to some papers and read a list of names. "No. There is no such name here. I had better be frank with you. If you cannot find him and prove his guilt, you will have to stand your trial, Mr. Pershore. And if you take my advice, you will not lose a second in getting to work. You will see, of course, that in the eyes of anyone not knowing you, the facts are strikingly against you; and juries are juries."

His manner was very strange and almost accusing. "Surely you do not believe that I am in any way concerned?" I asked.

"Your father is one of my oldest friends, and it is hard to believe his son would be

capable of such a thing. But were that not so, I should have great difficulty, judging only by the facts, in taking any other view."

"I am as innocent as a child unborn, Baron Vodressy. The man was a relative of our family. My cousin, Geoffrey Pershore."

"You had better not tell me anything, please," was the rather curt reply.

I threw up my hands. "I will find the Greek. I suppose I am at liberty?"

He hesitated and coughed in some embarrassment. "Yes; but—well, the police have the thing in hand already, and I fear that you must make the inquiries with their assistance. You see, I am not a free agent in such matters. I should recommend you to consult the secret police agent, Brentvosch. If any man can ferret out the truth, he can. He is in attendance now."

This looked uncommonly like my being arrested; but I could not venture to take any other course. I agreed therefore. The man was called in, and then we two went into a private room where I explained everything freely.

It was undoubtedly a very ugly mess in which I found myself, and Brentvosch was an exceedingly depressing companion, despite his reputation for cleverness. He had an inveterate hatred of Englishmen; did not believe my story; and showed no hesitation in letting me know as much.

He fastened on every point which told against me and questioned me closely on each one, refusing to look at anything I said in

explanation, except when it told against me.

"We can of course test some of these things, but——" He finished with a significant shrug of the shoulders, as though it would all be the merest waste of time; and that the simplest course for me would be to make a full confession at once.

"You appear to have made up your mind already," I said, testily. "That is scarcely likely to help me far."

"I shall do my duty," he said, indifferently; adding, after a pause, with sinister significance: "Before we start I had better tell you that I shall of course be your constant companion until you have either proved your innocence or been arrested yourself on the charge. I say this so that you may know how I shall regard everything you say."

"That's a very comforting assurance," I replied drily. "It would save time if I were to be arrested at once."

"Quite true," he agreed. "But the Herr Baron wishes your story to be tested in the first place. Shall we start?"

We went first to old Steinberg in search of Dromach. The latter was at home, and his statement tended in some slight degree to shake the agent's conviction. The Greek was able to describe the dagger very clearly. He accounted for his possession of it, and declared that he had sold it to Alexandrov on the very eve of his departure from Vienna; and the old shoemaker's daughter was able to corroborate him in the latter most important point.

We did not tell him the reason why it had to be traced, as the agent suggested that he would probably disappear if he knew that he had to testify against a fellow countryman. And for that same reason it was decided to place him in confinement meanwhile. A convenient little arrangement of the Austrian law.

The next thing was for him to identify the dagger itself. The agent had something very disagreeable to say about this. It appeared incredible to him that I should have allowed such an important piece of evidence to go out of my own hands. "Assuming that you did give it to this woman"—this was Catarina, of course—"a matter very difficult to believe—it is extremely unlikely that you will ever see it again. But we can go to her, if you think it is any use."

He depressed me to such an extent that I was almost inclined to share his gloomy opinion; and on the drive to Catarina's house—to which we took Dromach, as I wished him to tell her his story about the dagger—I could see nothing but failure and ruin ahead.

I left the two in the carriage—not without a protest from the man—and I saw her alone in the first instance. I found her more hostile than ever, and full of suspicion as to my present purpose. She would scarcely remain in the room, and denied volubly that she knew anything about Alexandrov's whereabouts. He had been threatened by the police and had fled in consequence. That was her story and she repeated it more than once.

"Where is the dagger? Give it me," I replied.

"I gave it to Alexandrov, of course. He has it," was her answer.

I stared at her in blank dismay.

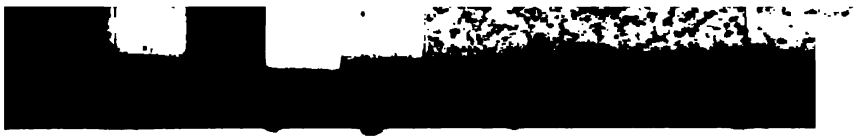
"Did what, Catarina?"

"I gave it to Alexandrov. How else could he have identified it?"

"It was madness. You have given him the very evidence which would have convicted him and saved me. You have ruined me, Catarina."

It was true. The dagger was the very foundation of everything. Without it, my case fell utterly to pieces. I was ruined: utterly and hopelessly ruined. I could picture the grim scepticism with which the agent, Brentvosch, would hear this story.

With a groan of bitter anguish I fell back in my chair and hid my face in my hands.



CHAPTER XXIX.

BANISHED—ON CONDITION.

I HAD indeed been a fool to part with possession of the dagger; and as I sat in Catarina's room, stunned by the news that she had given it to Alexandrov, I could see no possible means of repairing the blunder.

For a moment a wild thought of attempting to fly occurred to me. To remain meant now to face a trial for murder with the virtual certainty that I should be convicted. And it took all the resolution I possessed to put the thought away and stop to face the consequences.

Catarina paid little heed to my despairing distress. She was still angry; presumably because of her belief that I had driven Alexandrov from the city.

"It is not my fault. What else could I do?" she cried, after a time.

"Where is Alexandrov?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why ask me that?"

With a bitter sigh I rose. It was all over; and all I could do now was to go out and tell the police agent. Of course my arrest would follow immediately.

"You were very bitter the last time I saw you, Catarina. Perhaps it will satisfy you to know that in a few minutes I shall be under

arrest on the charge of having murdered Provost, and shall be unable to prove my innocence, because you have thrown away the evidence which would have cleared me. This dagger."

"I have not thrown it away. It is safe."

"What do you mean by safe?"

"With Alexandrov, of course."

I smiled bitterly. "Yes, he may be trusted to keep it safe enough."

"When Dromach is found it will be forthcoming," she answered earnestly.

A gleam of hope flickered up in my heart. "What do you mean by that? That you can really find it? Do you see all that this means to me? For heaven's sake, speak out. My very life is at stake."

"When Dromach is found it will be forthcoming," she repeated.

"Dromach is outside in the carriage waiting to identify it. He sold it to Alexandrov."

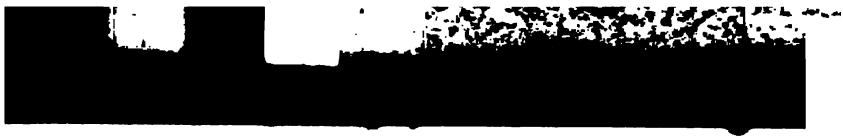
She started and changed colour at this. Then shook her head vigorously.

"Why do you tell me that? He is the murderer," she cried, vehemently. "He is not in Vienna even. I know that."

"I will bring him in and you shall hear his story for yourself."

"He is Gerard's murderer," she repeated fiercely. "He dare not face me. You have been deceived."

I went out to the carriage and told the police-agent what had passed; and we all three returned to Catarina. The sight of Dromach appeared to infuriate her; and her eyes had



the gleam of a wild beast mad with the scent of blood.

Dromach glanced first at her and then at us. Glances full of nervous unrest; but not of guilt. He was in the hands of the police, and this had frightened him; and Catarina's wild looks increased his discomfort. He thought that she also was in some danger from the police.

"Why am I brought here? What is this to Catarina?" he asked.

"You need not be in any fear, Dromach," I told him. "All we wish is that you repeat to Catarina what you have already told us about that dagger."

He hesitated and then hurriedly appealed to Catarina. "Shall I tell, Catarina?" he asked in Greek.

With a flash of hate from her vengeful eyes and a contemptuous shrug, she cried: "Tell what lies you will, they will not save you."

"I have told no lies," he declared vehemently. "I would never lie to you."

"Describe the dagger, Dromach," I said.

He repeated the minute description he had already given us, and how he obtained possession of it.

"You see it is the same," I said to Catarina.

She was intensely moved; but not yet shaken in her former belief. "Of course, he would know it. It was his own," she said, with a vicious, contemptuous look.

"What do you mean by that?" he shouted. fiercely. "What is all——"

"Never mind that, Dromach," I broke in.

"Tell Catarina when you left Vienna, and when you returned."

He gave the dates of his departure and return.

"He lies," declared Catarina sternly.

"Old Steinberg has proved that without question, Catarina. Isn't that so?" I asked Brentvosch.

"Without a doubt," he agreed.

This made a deep impression on Catarina. For the first time I saw her belief in Alexandrov's story was beginning to waver. She sat casting her eyes from side to side in agitated thought. Two or three questions and replies in Greek were rapidly exchanged between the two, about Dromach's presence in the Riesenstrasse on the night of Provost's murder; and the replies added to her belief in his innocence.

Then came a pause. "Now tell Catarina what you did with the dagger, Dromach," I said. "Nothing but the bare truth, mind."

"I sold it to Alexandrov the night before I left Vienna."

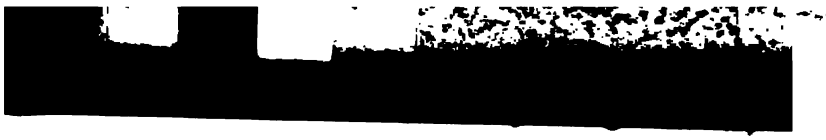
"Can you prove that?" asked Catarina, between her tightly clenched teeth.

"Steinberg's daughter, Elsa, was present and remembers. These gentlemen heard her say so to-day."

"That is true," declared Brentvosch.

Catarina's face was now white and set; like a face graven in marble save that her eyes were glowing like coals of fire. Then she rose.

"I think I can find the dagger, that you may see it," she said, and left the room. I



heard her go into an adjoining room, come out, and then climb the staircase.

At that point the police-agent justified his reputation for shrewdness.

"Who is in the house?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"She must be watched. Come—quick!" and together we followed her.

She went into a room upstairs at the back and turned the key. He signed to me, and I knocked at the door. There was no answer.

"I must speak to you at once, Catarina," I called.

But still all was silent.

Then there was a groan in a deep voice.

"Alexandrov!" I said to my companion.

The door was a flimsy one, and in a trice the agent's burly shoulder had burst it in, and we entered.

We were only just in time.

Alexandrov lay on the bed, staring with eyes of fear at Catarina, who held the dagger in the folds of her dress, and had just wakened him.

She turned on us as we burst in, and had not my companion seized her arm the dagger would have been sheathed in Alexandrov's heart.

She was quivering with passion, and her lips trembled.

"I would have killed him. Why did you stop me? I had the right to. He killed my Gerard, and has lied to me. His life is mine, and I claim it. He crawled to me in the night, swearing the police had wounded him, and that if I did not succour him I should never be revenged. And all the time——" Here her

fury broke all bounds. Wrenching herself free, she fought with us both, raving hysterically, as she tried to fix her hands on the throat of the maimed wretch, who shrank from her and cried out to us to protect him.

We had to use no little force to get her out of the room.

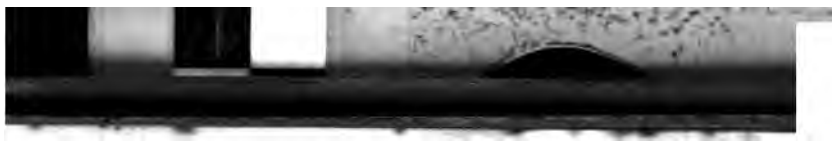
Before we left the house we had his confession. He was so afraid of being left at Catarina's mercy that I think he preferred to obtain the protection of the police by telling the truth.

He had always been jealous of Provost; and meeting him at the railway station on the night of his return from Belgrade, he had stalked him in the fog to my rooms in the Riesenstrasse. The place had been left open by my servants, who were in the pay of Lepova's agents, and he had followed Provost up to the flat, and stabbed him after a desperate quarrel.

Flying instantly, he had met me in the fog and had taken me for the ghost of the man he had murdered—just as he had done that night in the gallery.

When Catarina, later, had shown him the dagger, he had understood his danger, and put the thing on Dromach. Then, as I had already surmised, he had waited in the city for the abduction of Normia, which was to give him the money he needed to take Catarina away on an imaginary hunt after Dromach.

The failure of the abduction scheme left him without means to leave the city, and he had trusted to Stephanie to shield him, remaining at the Black House, while writing to Catarina



that he had had to fly. Learning the part I had played in the gallery, and seeing how I had tricked him, he had joined in the attack upon us to kill me in order to get rid of the evidence against him. He had been seriously injured in the fall from the balcony, but had succeeded in crawling to Catarina's house for shelter.

When we had the true story of Alexandrov's guilt, there were some irritating formalities to be complied with, and I had to return with Brentvosch to the police quarters—taking Alexandrov with us—and make a sworn deposition of the facts in my knowledge; and as soon as that was completed I hurried back to Baron Vodressy.

He congratulated me upon having been able to clear myself from suspicion; but I had so entirely forfeited his goodwill by my action in regard to the Black House conspiracy, that his congratulations were little more than formal words.

"It remains for you now, Mr. Pershore, to return to Belgrade and explain your conduct to Count Mirkov—your breach of duty."

"I should like some news of the Princess Normia, Baron."

"The matter is nothing to me. You must apply to the Count. He may not take the same view of your conduct that I do," he replied, sternly.

"Will you tell me where she is?"

"I repeat, it is no concern of mine."

"If I appeal to you as my father's friend and tell you that she is very dear indeed to me

and that I am consumed with anxiety on her account, will you not say a word to relieve my fears ?" I pleaded earnestly.

But the plea, instead of softening his resentment, appeared to strengthen it. His face was as hard as a piece of granite and his eyes like steel as he looked up. "Am I to infer that you allowed any private feelings of your own for this misguided young woman to warp your judgment and lead you to perpetrate this betrayal of your duty ? I will not discuss the matter a moment longer."

"As you decide, of course," I said calmly, although I was on fire in my angry disappointment. "Is there any word I can carry to Count Mirkov in regard to the Railway concessions ?"

"No, Mr. Pershore. That matter has all been settled while you were dallying after this young woman and forgetting your duty."

There was thus nothing left but for me to hurry to Belgrade and try to make my peace there. I left Vienna that night, carrying with me a load of very gloomy thoughts.

I had set out hoping to win my spurs as a diplomatist ; and was returning defeated, embarrassed, and, if Baron Vodressy were right, discredited. I had certainly made a terrible mess of things ; and I felt that, if it had not been for Normia and my depressing anxiety on her account, I would just have accepted defeat and hurried back to England rather than face my old chief.

But to save her from the penalties she had incurred through her connection with the plot,

I would face old Nick himself; and it was my testimony which would alone make plain the compulsion under which she had acted.

I sent the Count a wire to prepare him for my arrival, and early on the following morning I went to his office.

To my consternation I found him in his severest mood. Without a word of greeting he asked me bluntly why I had come.

"To explain everything," I replied.

"I desire to hear no explanation."

"Surely you will at least listen to me," I cried; and gave him a circumstantial account of everything that had occurred, dwelling in detail upon the fact of Normia's position and the way she had been forced into the plot.

"Your explanation, as I had expected, is less a palliation of your own conduct than a plea for her."

"Because her safety is more to me than my own. She is the woman I love."

"You have not referred to your frustration of Captain Nescher's plan?"

"I don't deny it. But at that time I saw how I could break up the whole conspiracy. I should do the same again. I alone was in a position to prove how she had been coerced"

"What do you hope from this visit to me?"

"Visit?" I repeated, catching at the word.

"You are of course no longer in the employ of the Government. And by your venturing to return here I am placed in a very difficult position in regard to yourself."

"I don't care what you do to me. It is Normia I care about."

He remained a second or two in frowning thought. "Well, what do you want?"

"News of Normia. To know that she is safe. To see her if I can, and ask her to marry me. Where is she?"

Another pause followed, longer than before. "Her case is under consideration, and of course it is impossible for you to interfere in any way until a decision has been arrived at. Your own matters have also to be dealt with. You must see this. Return this afternoon."

More than that he could not be induced to say; and I left him feeling even more depressed than before the interview. I had looked for anything rather than this sort of unsympathetic treatment at his hands.

A glance at his stern features when I entered his office in the afternoon told me that he was in much the same mood as the morning, and my heart fell. I feared the worst for Normia.

"The decision has been made," he said without a word of preface. "The so-called, or, rather, mis-called, Princess Normia has been guilty of an unforgivable crime, and she must take the consequences."

"But I assure you, on my honour, that she was forced into it," I protested.

He waved the protest aside as of no import.

"You are in love with the young woman, and are therefore no judge of her conduct. I warned you once before that you must choose between her and myself. You have now chosen."

"I don't care two straws about myself; but it is a rank injustice——"

"You are not the arbiter of justice in Servia, Mr. Pershore. It is lucky for the young woman that we have no Siberia. My advice to you is to return to your own country at once, marry, and stay at home. You understand your own people better than ours. When will you start?"

"I shall not go until I know that Normia——"

"When will you start, Mr. Pershore? For your past services I overlook your omission to wire me at once the details of the Black House affair and your frustration of Captain Nescher's plan. But you will start to-night."

"I'll be hanged if I leave Normia in the lurch like that," I cried furiously.

There was just a flicker of the lids as the stern eyes were bent on me, and the cold thin lips were pressed together tightly as he replied: "If you are here to-morrow, you will be imprisoned. But I will spare you that. I will have you conducted across the frontier, and until you leave, you will be under arrest. I will call your escort; and you may judge how heinous I consider your conduct when I tell you that your escort's life will depend upon seeing you out of the country;" and he rose.

"I won't go. I swear to heaven I won't. You can put me——" But he did not wait for the finish—did not even look round as he left the room.

Leave Normia in that scurvy fashion I would not for fifty Governments, I swore to

myself as I paced the room excitedly. Thank heaven I had enough influence to back me in pleading her cause. He might put me across the frontier a hundred times; I would only return. And, as for the escort—well, it would have to be a pretty strong one to——

And then I stopped abruptly, for the door opened gently, and the "escort" entered.

The whole malicious ingenuity of my old chief was laid bare on the instant.

I smiled. The smile broadened, and as I rushed and seized the "escort's" hands, there was an answering smile and a deep blush—the smile from eyes that were radiant with happiness.

"Are you the 'escort,' really?" I asked, scarcely able to believe it.

Normia nodded.

"He is a man of iron, that old chief of yours, but there is a flaw in some of the metal."

"In the heart, and you've melted it," I said, laughing.

She shook her head.

"No, no. But do you know my sentence?"

"No. But I know he has discharged me."

"I am banished; but—but only on condition," she cried, with lovely confusion.

I thought I could guess the wily old man's condition, and my heart leapt. But I assumed an expression of great anxiety.

"What is it?"

She smiled. We were quite close enough to one another then for me to read her expression easily.

"I believe you do know, Guy;" and she blushed vividly.

"He is an old villain if the mere thought of it makes you blush like that," I said, with much indignation. "But tell me."

"Everything is to be forgiven if—if I——" but she could not say it, and substituted: "if I don't come back."

I decided to be merciful.

"Are you to escort me all the way to England?"

"I—I suppose so;" and her eyes danced merrily.

"How are you to come back?"

"I tell you I am not to come back at all. And he will have that clear before he lets me go at all."

"Have what clear?"

"Guy!"

"The old matchmaker!" I laughed.

"There, you did know all the time! You see I can't help it, don't you?"

"Would you if you could?"

"He didn't give me the chance," she cried, with a side glance and a delicious grimace.

The chief came back then. He had evidently been listening.

"Well?" he asked.

"Yes, quite well. The best it could be, indeed. I am already under arrest."

"Umph," he coughed drily. "I knew you wouldn't stop here if this rebel was banished. That's why I discharged you."

"I wish to thank——"

"It wasn't kindness—only policy, boy.

When she's married to you in England, she'll be too busy troubling you to trouble us out here. Now, escort, take the prisoner away. The rest of the party will join you at the train—your mother and sister, I mean."

The escort did a most unmilitary thing at that. Greatly to the grim old man's concern, a pair of white arms were thrown round his neck and soft lips pressed kisses on his cheeks. And a sob was breaking in her voice as she cried: "How can I thank your Excellency?"

He held her a moment, peering shrewdly into her eyes. "God bless you, child. You have had a narrower escape than even that man who was dead knows. Here, prisoner, take your escort away, or you'll see me make a fool of myself for a pretty girl's sake."

I believe it was many years since the hard old eyes had been so near to a suspicion of moisture as when he waved us out of the room.

We went, hand in hand, as befitted gaoler and prisoner.

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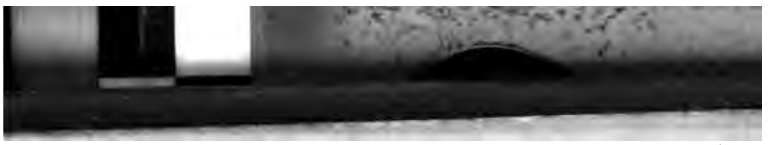

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